

MOTHER HUBBARD

By

W. E. RICHARDS

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*“ To have thy asking, yet wait manie yeeares ;
To fret thy soul with crosses and with cares ;
To eat thy heart through comfortlesse dispaire—”*

EDMUND SPENSER.—*“ Mother Hubbard’s Tale.”*

The characters in this book are imaginary. Never have there been or will be such persons as Eli and Martha Hubbard and their brood. Yet their like may be found in many a colliery village on the Notts. and Derby border. For they live not in one place but in many places, and Northedge, for which the map may be searched in vain, has not been drawn from any particular model, though it has some of the flavour of all.

Earnest readers, nurtured on crime fiction, may play at spotting the originals of characters and places. They may guess right, and yet they will be wrong.

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CHAPTER I

DAVE crouched on his heels, collier-wise, and made mud-pies in the yard between Top and Bottom Row. He worked with fierce concentration, and only frowned when shrill women urged him to get him dressed or when old men gave a friendly smack on his bare behind as they shambled by. Round the taps in the yard, the miners' womenfolk washed their dirty linen. Dave knew, with the uncanny insight of childhood, what their high cackling laughter meant. They were talking of his new brother that Mrs. Adler was going to bring in her little bag. He didn't want a little brother.

Upstairs in number 42, Mother Hubbard groaned softly. Her pains were coming on again. The air in the little bedroom was stagnant and hot. Little beads of sweat gathered on her bleached face and trickled down her nose. She thrust her hand in her mouth to keep from screaming. Why didn't Mrs. Adler come?

The pains ceased and she lay panting. If she could only get up for a minute and put on her best coverlid. Perhaps the doctor would have to be fetched, and the bed would shame her. Mrs. Adler didn't matter. She was a slut herself. But the doctor was a gentleman. Her lips framed a silent prayer for strength to put the room to rights. She wasn't a woman of the Rows. When Eli Hubbard, twenty years before, had brought her there, her heart had sunk, and two big tears had trickled down her cheeks.

"What's wrong wi't, lass?" he had demanded. "It's a Company house and I had more than a bit of bother to get t' key."

And she had brushed the tears aside and said there was nothing wrong really, only she hadn't thought it was like this.

"'Appen if things go reet, lass," said Elia "we'll ta'e one of them villas in Cross Street in a bit."

But they didn't. First Moses was born, and it took all their time to manage. Then came Enoch, and after him John and David. Mother Hubbard resigned herself to a long wait. But when her sons grew and tipped up their wages on the Friday night, she would see that it happened. In the meantime she refused to surrender to the slatternly standards of the Rows. Her floor was scrubbed until the uneven bricks glowed, her table was scoured to the colour of cream, and her oven was polished like a mirror.

She was unconquered, but the fight had taken its toll. Her face was still ruddy but wrinkled like a ripe apple, and her mouth was thin-lipped and decisive. She no longer cared about her figure, and her feet troubled her. It wasn't her fault she had let herself go. If Eli had stood by her . . . But then Eli was soft. He'd gone the ways of other men.

"Never wed a miner," her mother had urged. She knew now what she meant. But she'd made her bed and she'd have to lie on it. She was lying on it right enough, she thought grimly. Her bed? It never was her bed. Only for the short weeks her man had lain in the hospital with a broken leg. It was the same bed in whose vastness she had crept on the night of her wedding when a strange Eli, inflamed with liquor— But she didn't like to dwell on that even now. How often she had lain through the night, afraid to move for fear of disturbing her man, who must go to the pit before dawn. Her sons had been born in it. The first-born. Unbelievable pain. Pain beyond thought and reason when she had prayed for the end to come quickly. And then the miracle of a new life. That was her tenderest recollection.

"The little beggar," Eli crowed when the tiny fingers closed round his with a tight grip. "He's as strong as a horse."

Eli was very close to her in those days.

Another stab of pain. Where was Mrs. Adler? Mrs. Adler was already on her way to the Rows. The knot of miners squatting on the kerb outside the Red Lion made way for her just as they would have made way for the

doctor. For when Mrs. Adler wore that bonnet with the dancing sequins, they knew she was on duty, and they showed their respect.

The agony went on and on. The sun beat pitilessly on the low roof ; the screaming of children streamed through the half open window ; the clang of shunting wagons and the hiss of escaping steam from the yard beyond added pin-pricks to the agony. Time stood still.

"Emma," cackled a stringy slattern, "Mrs. Adler's here."

A shapeless bundle of clothes heaved itself to the doorway.

"It's her reet enough. I knowed she wor near her time."

Mrs. Adler, who knew them both professionally, nodded curtly, and went about her business.

Two hours later the Paddy mail clattered home. It was a train of obsolete cushionless carriages with broken windows which panted backwards and forwards with every shift from the New Pit to Northedge. Long before the train pulled up, the miners leaped out with a fine clatter of clogs and pit boots.

First came the lads just emancipated from school, larking, tripping each other, their laughing red lips shining out of blackened faces. Then the younger men, hurrying, their coats swinging open and their chests exposed to the wind, arguing about pigeons, whippets, and a bit they'd had on the two-thirty. After them the staid family men, drooping their shoulders and sucking at their pipes.

The last batch formed the old guard, gnarled veterans of the pit who had survived falls of roof, fire damp, and cage mishaps. Their speech had a staccato brevity and was flavoured with Biblical idiom. They were the heirs of the sturdy Methodism that had swept these dales years before. They had seen death close at hand and were not afraid.

Eli with his warped legs straddled ahead of the veterans but behind the youngsters. He was as good as any of 'em. He was a wonder for his age, and he knew it. Let them make obscene jests about the length of his family. He hadn't done yet. Water bottle slung from one shoulder,

his snap-tin from another. A touch of swagger in his lurching stride. He got the news before he had gone five yards, for the Rows were not reticent. Blowsy women gathered round their steps and shouted ribald greetings. He smiled grimly and lurched on.

He opened the door of number 42. A large woman in a tent-like apron stopped her bread-buttering.

"Aw reet?" he asked, jerking a thumb upwards.

"No thanks to thee," snapped the woman. "She's had a bad time. That'll do I reckon. I've got my own to see to. I've mashed."

Little John had pattered in, put his fingers on the edge of the table, and tried to lever himself up to see what there was to eat.

"Where's Mam?" he whimpered. "Want my tea?"

The woman gave him a slab of bread and butter.

"Ta'e that," she said, "and shut thi gob."

Old Eli slowly removed his pit boots and sat in a tired stupor.

"Thee can manage?" snapped the woman, her hand on the latch.

"Aye, missis," responded Eli with a nod of dismissal. The door slammed. A thin shrill cry penetrated from the room above.

"Unto us a Son is born," thought old Eli. He was as good as any of 'em—still. Another mouth to feed, but soon they'd be going to the pit and tipping up their wages on the Friday night, and then he'd be able to pay his board and have a bit in his pocket. Now, if they'd been daughters. Daughters, he ruminated, only brought trouble. Of one sort or another, but chiefly one sort. But sons hewed for you if you got a stall, and kept the money in the family.

Then he rose stiffly, walked irresolutely to the door, and creaked up the narrow stair. He squeezed through the lintels into the bedroom.

"Aw reet, lass?" he croaked anxiously.

The white, drawn face on the pillow did not move. The beady eyes peered at his for an instant.

"Aye."

Her voice came, tired and heavy.

"A lad?" he asked.

"Aye," she sighed.

"Aye," he repeated stupidly. He wanted to pat her hand and say how brave she had been. She wanted to feel a man's grip on her hand. To lean on him and absorb his strength. And there was nothing. Nothing.

The baby whimpered. Eli saw a wizened little face with a tuft of black hair. A face contorted with distress. Mechanically the mother comforted the mite.

"I'll get my tea," said Eli abruptly. "I can manage."

The white face on the bed smiled grimly. He stumbled downstairs. That was over.

He ate his meal noisily, washing it down with gulps of stewed tea. The children came in, shouted "Mam," and when no response came, greedily snatched slices of bread, and scampered outside to eat. Replete, old Eli leaned back in his wooden armchair. His head dropped forward and he slept.

At the other end of the village, Mrs. Adler was discarding her bonnet of sequins. Then she took off her boots, unfastened her corsets, pulled the cork out of her little bottle and took a satisfying suck. After a long rest, she sighed, fetched down the new-fangled register the law required her to keep, found her pen, ink and glasses which were never where a body left them, and sat down to record her case.

"Mrs. Hubbard, 42 Top Row, 3 p.m." She scratched with her head on one side. "A boy. Head first. Administered a little water."

She chuckled at that and had another suck at her bottle.

"Fifth," she added with a sigh, "10/- paid."

For a first child she could charge twelve and six. The first was more trouble, but the last wasn't so easy either. If Ma Hubbard had another it would finish her, doctor or no doctor. Mrs. Adler had no great opinion of doctors.

And that was how Abby Hubbard entered the world.

CHAPTER II

ABSALOM was the quiet one.

"She wain't rear him," was the opinion of the neighbours.

But he went on his way, smiling or frowning over his own secret thoughts. Nobody bothered about him. There were too many clamouring for notice. In the long winter evenings when Moses and Enoch were playing and scuffling round the street lamp at the entrance to Top Row, the three youngest stayed indoors.

Then the door shut, the curtains drawn, the fire made up, No. 42 became a little cave of content. It was the one hour of the day that repaid Mother Hubbard for the toil of all the rest. She sat in the one armchair (the master's by prescriptive right), her ample lap filled with stockings, socks, and torn breeches. Her mouth was grim when she regarded the size of the holes, or perhaps it seemed to be grim because it was a receptacle for needles and bits of thread, but she wasn't feeling at all grim inside.

Baking night was the best of all, for then, hot little fingers could poke the dough when it rose miraculously in the big earthenware pan. Sometimes she would let them, wriggling with excitement, take a knife and mark the sign of the Cross on the dough without which no dough could be made bread. And sometimes she would let them knead a small piece, smear it with a lick of jam, and pop it in the oven to brown. It tasted good.

On darning nights, they amused themselves. John was the organiser. He wanted them to dress up and pretend. Dave and Abby had to sing hymns while he mounted a chair and preached to them. Dave and Abby behaved like all children in chapel. They fidgeted, sucked gob stoppers when they had any, and whispered. Dave wanted to preach. He was sure he could preach better than John. But Abby didn't care about the game. He interrupted the eloquence with the scratching of his pencil on a slate.

Mother Hubbard hated this slate. It fair set her teeth on edge, but she couldn't bear to take it from him: he

was so happy drawing men with lots of buttons, toasting-fork arms and legs, and a pipe belching forth clouds of curly smoke.

One morning Abby was sitting on the doorstep busy at his slate, when a chapman called with his large bag of linens, coloured cottons and ribbons.

"What are you doing, my little man?" he said in his truity, salesman's voice.

"Drawring," said Abby in his 'mind-your-own-business' voice.

"And what have you drawn?" persisted the strange gentleman.

"A man," said Abby truculently. As if the old fool couldn't see it was a man.

The chapman took the slate. "So it is," he exclaimed. "I wonder if *I* could draw a man."

So he lowered himself to the step and drew a man. He drew him in profile.

"He's only got one eye," criticised Abby.

"Oh, no. He's got two, but you can only see his left eye. His right's on the other side of the slate."

"Go on," jeered Abby.

"You look at me sideways. Now can you see two eyes?"

Abby couldn't, even though he frowned hideously.

"Put a hat on his head," he commanded.

A hat was sketched in. One of those Muller hats now out of date.

"Silly," cried Abby, "you've cut half his head off."

"Can you see the top of my head when I've got my hat on?"

"Course not."

"Then you shouldn't draw what you can't see."

"Draw some buttons," commanded Abby.

The stranger drew buttons.

"In the middle," insisted Abby.

"I know they're in the middle," said the artist. "Look at me sideways again. Are my buttons in the middle?"

It was a grand man when he was finished even though he wasn't puffing out clouds of smoke. Abby preserved it

for weeks, fighting like a polecat when his brothers wanted to rub it out and draw a proper man. And when its outlines grew faint, he lined them in. And when, after many linings-in, the image finally disappeared, it didn't matter because Abby had learned that you had to draw what you saw. Nothing more and nothing less.

He went on drawing. On the paper the cheese came home in, in the margin of the weekly newspaper, or any scrap he could pick up. And he drew with his head on one side and his breath coming hard.

But Dave and John soon found this cave of warmth a prison. They wanted to go out in the Rows to share the games round the flickering gas lamp. Games of lurky and wrestling matches, their breath turning into smoke in the cold air, and their hob-nails striking sparks from the paving stones. They would hover on the outskirts of the group like the mice watching the pit ponies eat their snap, waiting for a chance to join in. Sometimes a lad raised a hand to cuff them, and it was music into their ears to hear Enoch say, "Eh, leave the kid alone."

Sometimes the lad dared Enoch, and then Dave and John felt delightful shivers down their spines. They would see Enoch walk slowly across, double up his fist, and hold it under their enemy's nose and say, "Smell of that."

Sometimes it led to a real fight, only ended by a scuffle to safety when a policeman was sighted.

In the daytime, the no-man's land between the Rows was their undisputed playground. The big lads had gone to the pit; the smaller lads to school. The women had got their menfolk off to the early shift and were busy with their pots and pans, although a few of their frailer sisters had gone back to bed. The men of the afternoon shift were still asleep. Only the grand-dads and the men "on compo" were about, and they didn't interfere. So, like the other lads, Dave and John dashed out in the open with nothing on but their short shifts, chased hens over the middens, started dog-fights, and were deaf as posts when shrill cries summoned them to come and dress.

But Mother Hubbard had only to whisper, "Dave, if

you want any breakfast—" and Dave heard and obeyed. He was out again before you could say knife, carrying a huge slice of bread and jam with a semi-circle bitten out of it. In a few minutes he was sitting on the earth-privvy, drumming his heels and crooning a song of his own which went on and on and on. He enjoyed this tune-making, and the privvy was the only satisfactory place to make tunes in. But some old man would be sure to come along and say, "How much longer are you going to be?"

Caught and dressed at last, Dave and John escaped into the Rows again. To the end of his days, Dave's nostrils twitched when he remembered the smells. The acrid smell of colliers' fires, raked but never allowed to die, and piled high on a week's ashes. "Allowance" it was called. Free, but for the cost of leading, which meant half-a-crown a load. Then there was the sour, soapy smell of wash-day, and it was always someone's wash-day in the Rows. Those who went to chapel washed on Mondays. For them, wash-day was a religious observance nearly as sacred as Lord's Day. The sinful washed when they could put it off no longer. All through the week it went on, and the lines of clammy cottons and dark singlets strung across the mud yard made play difficult. The middens had their own smell, and when the wind was in the north, the sulphur fumes from the pit hill made everybody choke and splutter. Dave was "keen on the nose," but John took all these smells as a matter of course. He'd squat for hours like a little miner watching the colliery engine push the tubs of slag along the crest of the pit hill, holding his breath for the moment when the tub went arse-over-tip and shot the slag out to slither helplessly down the slope. He meant to drive that engine when he grew up.

Every afternoon, just after four, Moses and Enoch loped home from school, dribbling stones or salmon tins like professional footballers. Then the Paddy Mail came in, and the Rows echoed with the clatter of pit boots on the stones. That was Dad's shift.

"He's here, Mam," they shouted, and a minute later his huge frame filled the door. They would have fought

anyone who said he wasn't the tallest and strongest man in the Row.

"Eh oop," he greeted them, and slumped on the squab.

"Get the dirt off thee," said Mother Hubbard severely.

"Nay, lass," he said. "A collier's dirt nivver hurt nobody. Gie us my bit of snap. I'm fair clemmed."

And he ate his meal just as he was, and washed it down with scalding tea. When he had finished his wet red lips shone out of his black face. He leaned back, and in another minute a gentle snoring noise filled the room. Mother Hubbard cleared away, filled the kettle and the saucepan and put them on the hob, and turned her man's day clothes, airing round the fire, before they singed. She let him sleep on.

"Ee, I mun have just dropped off like," he said.

"Sleeping like a log," she said. "In your dirt and all."

"'Never wed a collier, lass,'" he mocked her. "That's what th' mother tould thee and thee took no notice. Gi'e us a kiss, lass."

"Nay. Wesh thysen, lad."

There was a clumsy scuffle, but he planted a black kiss on Mother Hubbard's cheek. She flounced to the sink and rubbed to get it off.

"You're a false 'un," he said. "Pretending you don't like it and all."

"Eli Hubbard," she cried. "Th'art too owd for that sort of thing. Get thee weshed. Th' watter's hot."

Then he stripped himself to the waist and with mighty sluicings and the hissing noise with which ostlers groom their horses, he polished his dead-white collier's skin till it shone.

"Going out?" she asked.

"Aye."

"Club?"

"'Appen."

It was a ritual, this conversation. Years ago, Mother Hubbard asked these questions, hoping for a different answer. Hope had died now, but the habit of questioning had gone on. If he had stayed at home, she would have

felt uneasy. He would be breaking in on that little fire-lit world of her own when her three younger sons were gathered round her knee. No, she didn't want him now.

CHAPTER III

DAVE was happy in the Rows. Things happened there, and Dave was always in the front row. Sometimes it was a fire, more often a fight with bare fists, and the police came, faces sternly pointing one way and eyes roving the other. Sometimes an old man or woman, feebly scratching and screaming, was bundled into a van and "taken away." The Salvation Army played hymns at the end of the Rows, and people were urged to put another penny on the drum. Sometimes a drunken man, who had forgotten the value of money, obliged. And there were gorgeous nights when the Rows stank with virtue, the small boys paraded with tin pans outside Ma Farmer's who was no better than she ought to be.

But Abby shrank from the rough contacts of the Rows. He liked to moon about by himself or to sit under the table in the kitchen weaving little stories in his head. Mother Hubbard stuffed him with food, gave him his dose of brimstone and treacle, and shooed him out into the open, but he just wouldn't grow up like her other lads.

"He looks half clemmed," grumbled his father, looking down on him without pride. He didn't often look at his children but when he did, he expected them to do him credit. And yet the little jockey was handsome, with sloe eyes that would set the lasses running after him when he was grown up.

"Eh oop," he said in a sudden fit of friendliness. "Thee come wi' me."

Abby went because he lacked courage to bolt up a gemmell and escape as Dave would have done. And the diffident little lad and the thick-set miner set off together. They barely spoke to each other. Old Eli wished he'd

never brought the kid. And Abby weaved a story about their journey to get away from the reality. But when they left the High Street, and slipped down Holmgate Lane, they were alone, and the years which separated them grew less. The father began to hum a Methodist hymn; he plucked a hawthorn twig and stuck it jauntily in his mouth. They pushed through a gap in a stone wall, and Abby almost stopped breathing with surprise. He was treading on thick springy turf, turf spangled with daisies.

His father clapped his hands, and rabbits, real rabbits, disappeared into the ground. He knew rabbits. They lived in little wire cages in the coal house. He laughed at their white scuts.

They went down a slope past sweet-smelling cows whose jaws moved sideways, down to a little stream where clean water tinkled over rounded stones or lay in deep still pools.

"'Sh," whispered the man.

Abby held his breath.

"See yon?"

Abby peered through the willows. A bird was strutting importantly on the bank. Disturbed by their rustle, it squawked, ran awkwardly to the bank, and flung itself over, leaving a tail of bubbles behind it as it struck the water. Then all grace and poise, it cruised briskly along the bank, and disappeared behind the weed.

"Coo," breathed Abby. "What was it?"

"Watter hen," explained his father. "Moor hen."

And Abby and the old man walked and talked and shared many secrets together. Then the child tired, and the man carried him. But at the High Street he set him down and told him to run home.

"Where have you been?" his mother asked.

"With Dad," Abby replied, proudly.

"Where did he take thee?" she demanded suspiciously.

"For a walk."

"I know his walks," she muttered. "Set thee down and rest."

"I seed a moorhen," he announced in his excited husky voice, "and rabbits—real rabbits—in a field, out there,"

he explained, waving his arm. "It's called the country."

"Aye, lad," she said softly "That's non the country. When I were a lass—"

Her voice faded away and her busy fingers dropped idly in her lap. She saw again the magenta-topped hills, the green fire of bracken, the stone walls dividing the meadows.

"I'd like to ta'e thee some day," she said gravely. "Just to see your grand-dad before he goes."

"Is he very old?" asked Abby.

"Aye. He's old. But he's got life in him yet."

"Is he a miner?"

"Not him," snapped Mother Hubbard. "He's a farmer."

"Cows?" asked Abby breathlessly.

Mother Hubbard sniffed, and down the years crept the sickly sweet smell of kine, she heard the soft squelching of their feet as, heavy with milk, they lurched to the white-washed byres. The stone-roofed windswept house on the edge of the moors called her.

"When are we going?" asked Abby.

"Some day," she replied mechanically. A busy mother gets into the habit of saying 'someday.'

"This week?"

"Soon," she smiled.

"Next week?" he persisted.

It was Harvest. The neighbours had rallied to help. Even drunken old Jasper from Stark Farm—a gaunt red ruin of a man who was terrible in his cups. Men heaving trusses of hay on to the wain. Little patches of sweat on their shirts. A cloud of flies pestering the patient horses. The sharp sweet scent of hay. The blinding glare when one left the cool shadows of the kitchen with something in an earthenware jug. Last year's sun-bonnet with this year's ribbons.

"Next week?" insisted Abby, planting a hot little hand in her lap.

"It's a long way," she fenced.

"How long? Miles an' miles?"

"There's a carrier's cart," she smiled, "as far as the

village, and it's a tidy step from there. Can you walk a mile and a half? "

"I can walk five miles," he bragged. "When do we go? "

In the end, Mother Hubbard had to go. She took Absalom and David. John could be left to look after himself. Besides, he'd rather scramble up the pit tip or snatch a ride on the Paddy Mail, pretending he was a real collier. And by much scheming, some skimping and a little cheating—for Mother Hubbard knew perfectly well that the milk money under the china likeness of the Prince Consort shouldn't have been touched—she scraped together their fares. The boys were wildly excited.

The carrier's cart was a covered wagonette full of exciting parcels and merchandise. A plank on each side made seats for passengers. Mother Hubbard wore her "black" because it was her best. Absalom hated it. He shrank from the feel of it, and promised his mother a red dress as soon as he went to work. Mother Hubbard shook with suppressed merriment. A red dress at her age, indeed. Over the offending black she wore a velvet cape trimmed with tiny beads. Absalom ran his fingers lovingly over this.

Both boys wanted to sit against the driver.

"Only one of 'em," decided Owd Ben.

Dave scrambled up beside him.

"If he gives thee any lip," said Mother Hubbard, "clip him."

"I will that," promised Ben.

With a flick of the whip, the old mare strained, the van creaked, and they were off. The adventure had begun.

The huddle of the mining village was soon left behind, and Absalom looked out through a tarpaulin archway on an unknown world. A white haze of dust was churned up by the wheels giving the view beyond an ethereal quality. A scene from a fairy tale. After leaving the bare plateau of the slag heaps and furnaces they dipped into a valley, past copses, dusty hedges, and trickling streams. And then began a climb. The road turned round as if afraid

of the hill, decided not to run away, saw an opening and turned again swiftly to use it. It was just how some people faced difficulties. John, for instance, went straight at them. He wouldn't climb like this. This was Dave's way. Dave always got what he wanted. He pretended he didn't want it, turned away, and then tried again from another angle.

Then came a stiffish bit where Owd Ben heaved his bulk out of the driver's seat and plodded by the patient mare, making the loud clicking noises which are supposed to encourage horses. Dave made the clicking noise, too. A huddle of farm buildings, a cow smell which made Absalom wrinkle his nose, and then a wind. Mrs. Hubbard sniffed.

"A bit parky up here, mother," called out Ben.

"It's like wine," she asserted, though wine had never passed her lips.

This was the top. Absalom thought he was on the roof of the world. Around him stretched an amphitheatre of hills clad in green and gold. Down below him a patchwork counterpane of fields with toy houses and a toy church.

"Asher," explained Mother Hubbard.

Old Ben clambered back, put on the brake, and they creaked and groaned down the steep hillside. The toy houses grew bigger. They weren't made of cardboard after all, but were solid structures of weather-beaten stone with great slabs of stone to form the roofs.

There's the church where I was wed, thought Mother Hubbard. There's the Red Lion just the same, and Revill, the joiner. My, he must have got on. There was a new stone wing to his house. And there were the two upright stones through which a body had to squeeze to gain the footpath to Dale End. Stiles weren't wood fences here, but narrow stone gateways. Towering above them was the Rocking Stone—a toadstool of granite that a child could rock. Megrim, the grocer, was still in business but it wasn't George Megrim. 'George' had been painted out and a shiny yellow 'Amos' substituted. Old George had passed over, then, and Amos must be his son. She

didn't remember a son. After her time perhaps. 'Families waited upon daily.' That was new. In her days families had to wait on George Megrim and they had to mind their manners or he wouldn't serve them. George had his pride.

By the White Swan gates, Owd Ben cried 'Whoa,' but the mare had already stopped. She looked round with a sardonic eye as if to say 'You and your whoas. I always stop here, and you know it. And hurry up with my nosebag.'

Mother Hubbard was helped down, all of a flutter, and set off with her two sons circling round her exactly like two impatient destroyers escorting a lumbering cargo boat. Down the dusty, white road they trailed.

At last they reached Dale End where the hills swept round to meet and dam up the valley. Past a tiny general shop, a toll bar house jutting with a reckless indifference to modern traffic well into the road, down a gravelled drive overgrown with grass which led to an ancient studded gate. The long gabled roof of a noble house could be seen beyond.

"Not here?" asked Dave incredulously.

"No, indeed," said his mother primly. "That's t'Big House. I was in service there—oncet."

She squeezed through an aperture, and they followed her down a narrow lane between low stone walls. Few people trod this path. It was grass-covered and the nettles, ivy and briars almost choked the way. Mother Hubbard caught her breath.

"Here we are," she said tremulously.

"Is that it?" asked Dave, unimpressed.

It was a low stone building standing in a bog of manure—an undistinguished building. One of its windows was boarded up.

Now she had got so far, Mother Hubbard wanted to turn back. But it was too late. A dog began to yap, and an old man came out into the porch and peered at them with red-rimmed eyes.

"It's me—Martha," quavered Mother Hubbard.

Dave and Abby looked at each other. Martha was a new name. She was 'Our Mam' to them, 'mother' to the elders.

"Oh, well, better late than nivver," the old man grumbled. "Come in out of the draught."

He led the way into a small room choked with furniture and with the sour smell that goes with old untended folk. The fire was burning at the top of a week's pile of cinders,

"These are my youngest," said Mother Hubbard. "Say how do you do to your grandad."

"How do," said Dave in a man's voice.

Abby couldn't get any words out. The old man grunted.

"Set thee down, Martha, and ta'e thy things off. I've nowt to ask thee to ha'e. Not a bite in t'house."

Dave looked mutinous and Abby's face crumpled. For weeks they had lived on the thoughts of cherry cake, cream buns, and scones which their mother had told them they were never without.

"I want nowt but a cup of tea," said their mother surprisingly. "You boys run and look at the cows and the pigs. I'll get tea ready as soon as I've had a talk with grandad."

The boys slipped out.

"They wain't find no cows," cackled grandad. "Sold 'em this long time. Turned 'em into good money. There's another cup in the pot, I reckon."

Mother Hubbard lifted the lid.

"It's stewed," she decided.

"I'll have no waste here," the old man rasped. "You always wor a waster. You owt to have learned sense by now."

He fetched out two grimy cups and slumped them on the table.

"I'll get tea," she said quietly. "Those children have got to eat."

"You leave things alone," he grumbled.

But Mother Hubbard padded about on her swollen feet, rinsing cups and saucers, wiping spoons, cutting slices of

bread from a stale loaf and spreading it thinly with rancid butter.

The two boys had strayed back to the curiously studded gate. They found that by climbing on the wall they could see the Big House and its lawns which sloped down to a lake. Abby sat on top of the stone coping, hugging his knees and humming a little tune. Here was beauty, order, peace and he feasted his eyes on it. Dave regarded it disdainfully. Some day he would have a house like it, only bigger. Twice as big. He began to count the windows.

"Where's the W?" he asked.

In his experience, conveniences were little brick boxes fixed at some distance from the house.

And then they heard the sound of Mother Hubbard's voice. Tea was ready.

They were glad when it was time to go home.

"Look, Mam!"

Abby tugged at his mother's sleeve as they passed the gates of the big house.

"That's nice, isn't it?" she forced herself to say.

"Nice!" bragged David. "I shall build a bigger house than that. Twice as big. With a hundred windows, when I'm growed up. For you, Mam."

"Bless the boy," she said. "I shall get t'Big House before I've done."

"Not that," exclaimed Dave impatiently. He knew already that the Big House was the Workhouse, and it was a disgrace to go in. "A new one. All to yourself."

"'Appen," she said drily. "Now don't dawdle or we shall miss the carrier."

In the groaning cart, with Dave chirping to the driver, and Abby sleeping peacefully, she faced the fact that another escape had been cut off. When the Rows grew unendurable, she had carried on, secure in the knowledge that she would always be welcome at the old homestead. But she had stayed away too long. It was quiet, deathly quiet, but it was the quiet of decay. Better the fecund, dirty, noisy life of the Rows than waiting for the end in a decayed countryside.

She knew now that she couldn't get out. She was too old to start all over again. Perhaps the children—Moses? No, he was a feeblar edition of his father. Enoch? John? They'd go, but not far from the pithill. Abby? No, he wasn't strong. He'd go under. But Dave? Yes, he'd do it. He wanted a big house. The little beggar. Well, he might get one. Look at Hezekiah Hopwood. Used to hawk oil for his dad, and sleep under the cart, and look at him now with red cushions in his pew at Top Chapel, and a house with two bow windows.

Dave would do it, she whispered to herself. He might save Abby, too.

She willed him to do it.

CHAPTER IV

SCHOOL was a battered red brick building with imitation Gothic windows, leaded panes, and a memorial tablet recording that it was erected by the British and Foreign Bible Society. It was still called the British School though in the official books it was the Northedge Undenominational.

A raw foggy morning. The school bell clanged rustily. John and Dave, hands dug deep into pockets and knees knocking together as if to rub warmth into each other, loped along like wolves. The bell wheezed into silence, the boys clattering into line. Two teachers came reluctantly out of the school. The boys were breathing heavily on their hands. The red-haired assistant put on his air of authority.

"Attention!" he commanded. "Right turn. Quick march!"

And then the slouching procession suddenly stiffened. The Head Teacher had appeared from nowhere into the middle of the yard.

"Halt!"

The red-haired assistant looked guilty. The boys

looked guilty. The Head Teacher glared fiercely and silently all along the lines.

"Syson, go into the school and stand at the desk."

The school stood like a regiment of grenadiers, motionless as stone, and as cold. Then the Head slowly reviewed his troops, passing along the line, stopping at dirty boots and ordering punishments. The back-rows wiped their boots furtively on stockinged legs. When all were chilled, physically and spiritually, he passed inside. The teachers, to recover their self-esteem, became hypercritical, and the march was again held up. Three lads who dared to blow on their hands were sent indoors for punishment. The victims of authority deftly kicked their neighbours as they passed to their doom. And so they all kept their self-respect.

Out of the November fog they passed, slinging greasy caps and threadbare overcoats on the pegs as they went, clumping along to the *March from Scipio* played mechanically by the junior teacher who was thinking of last night's dance, lined up in rows behind their desks, and when the piano ceased abruptly, standing silently in the stove-heated room. It was good for discipline to keep them standing.

"Attention !

"Kneel !

"Hands together !

"Who's that sniffing? Hubbard, have you got a handkerchief? Use it, then.

"Eyes closed.

"Let us pray ! "

And the harsh voice, very particular about its final consonants, introduced his young charges to God.

"Stand ! "

Traffic with God, except for certain simple Bible stories, was over until 4.30 p.m.

"I am not satisfied," began the rasping voice again.

The room grew hotter ; the smell of coke fumes, damp corduroys, and human breath rose in a cloud ; half-fed children saw the gas-jets spin round, and felt their hearts thump in their narrow chests. The teachers leaned against the sweating walls, feeling sick and uncomfortable.

A lanky boy flopped suddenly on his form. He was as pale as death.

"Take him out, Turner, and give him some water."

And the voice went on ruthlessly. On, and on, and on.

"You can't get something for nothing!" it rasped in conclusion. A momentary flame lit the Head's eye, the flame of creation, for this monumental lie was his contribution to the thought of his age. He immediately decided to bring out a second edition.

"You can't get something for nothing," he declared earnestly. "Repeat it."

"You can't get somethink for nothink!" the school obediently chanted.

He rang the desk bell. The junior teacher slumped down in front of the piano, tossed her pigtail, and crashed out the first bars of *The March to Scipio*, while the boys shuffled off to their classes.

The big room was divided by a glazed partition which was rolled noisily into position after prayers. Each section housed two classes, seated with their backs to each other. At the far end were two tiny class-rooms where the younger children were boxed. The school became a babel of noise as each of the four classes in the big room set to work, for the partition only pretended to be sound-proof. The piping voices of Standard III intoned *The Village Blacksmith*; Mr. Jones barked out questions concerning a firm of plumbers trading under the name of A. B. & C. Standard VI was receiving a music lesson from the Head, who sang in the Primitive Methodist choir and was therefore considered a musician, while the red-headed teacher in charge of Standard IV was groping his way through *The Story of Joseph*.

Dave had been caned for blowing on his hands to keep them warm, and was full of rebellion. He'd done nothing and been punished for it. You can't get something for nothing. Can't you? Under the spreading chestnut tree. Stop! What sort of a tree is a chestnut tree, boys? Conkers. Smooth, round conkers from Wastall Wood. Keep one eye open for the keeper. Sit down. Don't call out.

One, two, three. One, two, three. Mind the beat. Now, Miss Gregson. If A works twice as fast as B. . . . And Potiphar's wife. . . . Who's seen a village smithy? Come ever smi-ling Liberty, come. Ready. Once more. . . . Breathe deeply. Watch the beat. If C's cistern has a hole in it . . . And Potiphar's wife asked Joseph—I think we'll stop there. Who was the greatest musician the world has ever known? Handel. Who was he? 'Andel.

The day droned on. At eleven the bell rang, the boys stood to attention and trooped out into the playground, an orderly trooping of course, leaving a sprinkling of rebels behind to be 'kept in.' Mr. Jones patrolled the playground as if it were a quarterdeck. A wild game of football whirled and eddied round him. Excited youths came up breathing, "Please teacher, Willie Smith's pinched my top," and he dispensed justice with an even (and a heavy) hand. Two hoydens lately emancipated from school leaned against the gateposts and spat to show their contempt of authority. A blowsy woman joined them and howled threats at 'schulemester' for punishing her John Henry.

"Tell 'im I'll scratch 'is face for 'im. Tell 'im I'll pull the 'air off 'is 'ead. Tell 'im . . ."

A small boy plucked at teacher's sleeve.

"Please teacher," he pointed out hopefully, "there's a woman at the gate."

"Go away," snapped Mr. Jones, walking off with dignity in the opposite direction.

There were Hubbards scattered all down the school. Moses was in Standard VI, not because he deserved that honour, but because Standard V could get on very well without him. His face was a blank mask as he lounged in his seat. Nothing would goad him to any interest in work, for he was waiting for his thirteenth birthday when he could go to the pit. He had a dog's eared copy of the *Iron Man* underneath his exercise book. Its cover was decorated with a picture of a giant in armour with steam escaping from its joints. But even the incredible adventures of this ancestor of the Robots never caused a flicker of interest to cross his face. He copied his sums from his

neighbour with a show of secrecy so that his teacher could ignore this sin without losing face. They knew each other thoroughly.

Enoch was in Standard V and did just enough work to escape being left out of the school football team as a punishment. He couldn't be left out of the cricket team, because the school wouldn't win a match without him. He was going to be a cricketer and play for Notts at Trent Bridge. He was quite sure about that, but Potiphar meant nothing to him.

John, in the next class glowered over the problem of A, B and C and their cistern, and couldn't make any sense of their efforts. Some day he would knock a hole in a cistern and find out for himself. There were lots of things he wanted to find out for himself. Dave, in Standard II, smiled knowingly although his hand ached from his caning. He wasn't going to let them see he was hurt. Wait till he was as big as Moses and then see if the old fool dare cane him.

Something had happened at home. Its atmosphere was different, tauter, more electric. All the children felt it in different degrees. Even Moses went about with a secret smile on his face as if he knew something, but he didn't tell. It was something between Dad and Mam, but they never spoke about it before the children. They never used two words where one would do, but that didn't seem to matter. There was no sense in chatter-chatter-chatter when you were doing the same things day after day in the same order and at the same time. But their silences now could be felt. The boys just had to snatch their snap and escape into the Rows.

And then the storm broke. And it was all about nothing. Mam didn't want Moses to go down the pit, which was daft, because Moses wanted to go down. Why, everybody in the Rows went down except the broken-bodied old men. Dad was tremendous, but frightening.

"Sithee, lass," he roared, "no lad of mine's going to be a counter jumper or polish his backside on an office stool. What's good enough for his feyther's good enough for him."

"One collier's enough in this house," Mother Hubbard said quietly. "It's bad enough to listen all day for the hooter to blow. Aye, and when he's on t'night shift, I'll be lying awake listening for the signal to tell me that down there . . ."

She stopped and gasped for breath.

"Th'art fair wound up to-neet, lass. More words than you've spoke this last week. No harm'll come to the lad. It's a safe pit. Safest i'th' country."

"No pit is safe, Eli, and you know it. I know it. We all know it. Safe! How many women go into town on visiting day? What do they go to the hospital for? Because there's been a fall of roof in your safe pit. Or a tub's run away in your safe pit and pinned some poor lad against the wall. Or the cage in your safe pit bumps on the bottom and there's a broken limb or two."

"Why, you fair gi'e me the creeps. Look at me. Twenty-five years in the pit . . ."

"And the last fifteen I've had a pan of water steaming on the hob ready and waiting for the doctor. There isn't a night in those fifteen years when I haven't dreamed of a crushed body being carried up these stairs. . . ."

"That's enough," he said sharply. "It's not all beer and skittles down t'pit, but it's a man's job. It suits me fine, and it'll suit my lad."

"*Your* lad? Happen *you* brought him into the world."

"Nay, lass. I meant nowt. He's your lad as well as mine, I reckon. But don't you make out as I'd nowt to do with him. I had a terrible time. I wouldn't have believed it."

This was an old joke between them, but she didn't even smile this time.

"If you send him down t'pit," she said quietly, "I'll leave thee."

"By Guy, you will?" he roared. "And where wilt 'a go?"

Where would she go? She thought of the stone farmhouse in a fold of the Derbyshire hills, red cows standing knee deep in the grass, their tails swishing rhythmically, the

clatter of churns in the dairy, the ever-present sound of plashing water and the drowsy hum of bees. And then she remembered the old homestead in decay, and she shivered. Where could she go? It was an empty threat. Her mouth sagged, her face crumpled, and for the first time the little boys clustered in a corner saw their mother cry.

"Ha'e done wi't, lass," growled Eli, uncomfortably. "T'lad shall choose for hisself."

And Moses chose the pit. But Mother Hubbard tightened up her mouth and resolved that none of the others should follow Moses underground. Not if she knew it.

So Moses joined the band of pit lads and went to the morning shift with his snap tin along with his father.

"I've got two men to get off now," said Mother Hubbard.

On Friday night he brought home his pay ticket and tipped up his few shillings. He didn't run off to play round the gas lamp any more. He was grown up.

But he wasn't finished with learning.

"Learning makketh a full man," quoted his father. "If I'd had learning, lad, I should be preaching at Top Chapel to-day. I should have been on circuit."

For Eli was a 'stickit' lay preacher. The little chapels of the pit villages and the hamlets of the dales could not each afford a minister of their own. The reverend travelled to each in turn, but generally the chapel rafters echoed to the homely accents of the lay preacher. Unpaid and travelling long distances on foot with no reward save a meal with one of the deacons.

"Aye, lad," maundered his father. "I went up for the examination as spry as a cricket. For though I could testify and lead a meeting in prayer verbatim or ex-tempo as we say, I had to be examined by three reverends."

"What did they ask thee?" asked Enoch.

"About A, B, and C, and a cistern?" asked John.

"They asked me to prove the existence of God," old Eli said impressively.

"Hush!" said mother.

"Shut thi gob, woman. They asked me to prove the existence of God, and I done it. I gan 'em three proofs,

and the Reverend Skilby said ' Mester Hubbard, those are weighty proofs.' Just like that, lads. His very words. ' Those are weighty proofs.' And the second reverend says, ' Would our brother tell us if his proofs are original ? ' and I says, ' Of course they're original, and what is more, mesters (I said), I'll tell you where I got 'em. When I went to the City,' I said, ' I seed a little book in Sissons and Parkers. It cost me one and sixpence, and I bowt it. And here it is.' And the Reverend borrowed it, and that's the last I've seed of it. So be warned by that, lads, and nivver lend a book to a reverend."

" And did you pass, Dad? " persisted John.

But the old man rose abruptly with a face like thunder, and clumped out of the room.

" You're not to ask that again, ever," said Mother Hubbard. " Now he'll drink himself silly. Him and his old examination."

" I dunna want to preach," said Moses.

" 'Appen not," agreed Mother Hubbard. " But tha'll go to neet school all the same."

In the evening the windows of the school glowed yellow with gaslight and then steamed over. Night school was in session.

Moses, hands in pockets, pushed through the door. There he found plenty of pit lads of his own age, faces polished, and hair plastered. Plenty of young men were present too. Earnest fellows who belonged to the Y.M., and hoped to better themselves, and a sprinkling of men old enough to be his father. They came because the club and the pub cost money, because they had always come, because it was warm. Places near the stove were coveted.

A moon-faced master from another school was in charge, and two assistants, lured by the extra pay of two shillings an hour fussed about with exercise books and tried to look in charge of the situation. The discipline of the day school was absent ; only moral authority remained, and, to disguise its uneasiness, the staff was very hearty and man-to-man in its manner. Its advances were met with quiet cynicism.

Marking the register was the most important task of the evening, because the Board of Education paid its grant on the basis of attendance. Like most official requirements, it defeated its own object. What was taught became of small consequence. How many were present became the test of success. The whole energy of the staff centred itself on the number which could be led to the water. Proselytising became a fine art, and skilled propaganda was used to snatch pupils from the jaws of competing schools. But although backsliders were pursued with missionary zeal, week by week the classes dwindled away.

“Where’s Willie Smith?” demanded the Head.

“Courting,” the class tittered.

“Where’s John Jones?”

“On the booze.”

“Dear, dear,” muttered the Head at this frailty. “And Abraham Pollett?”

“Billiards.”

“Can’t you fellows fetch him along?”

“Nay. He’s in t’semi-final.”

“Well, try. And where’s Isaac Severn?”

“Ike’s on t’club. Fall o’ roof.”

“Dear me. Will one of you fellows call round and take our respects? And see that he comes back as soon as he’s fit.”

And one by one the life outside claimed them, so that every name on the register was precious.

The registers should have been marked by 7.30 and closed finally at 7.40, all who came afterwards ranking as absentees. But lads who were earning their living would not surrender their inalienable right to turn up when they were ready and not before. They liked a sleep after their snap, and they had just reached the toilet-conscious age. Besides, they had to wait for each other at the Toll Bar and make whistling noises to the girls before coming to night school in a body. Obviously, the answer to this requirement of the Board of Education was to mark the registers as late as possible.

But the Board held one trump card—the Inspector.

He never robbed his visits of the element of surprise. He was paid to make surprise visits, and surprise them he would even if he had to come in disguise. But he had to travel by train. If he came by the 6.30 (which was considered a low trick even for an inspector), he would get there for the opening of school, and the machinery would work with unnatural precision. There would be many late comers to be marked absent. But if he arrived by the 7.35, he would reach the school by 7.45, and if he found the registers unclosed, the fat would be in the fire.

So a boy from the day school earned an honest penny by hanging around the station entrance until the 7.35 had decanted all its passengers. If the short, stumpy figure of the Inspector in his pepper-and-salt suit stepped out of a first-class compartment, the boy hared back to school, put his head inside the door, and said, "Eh oop. He's come." In five minutes, everything was in order. Registers were marked and put away, magazines were hidden, teachers became persuasive and energetic, and the pupils, sportsmen all, realised it was up to them to be attentive seekers after knowledge. Of course, there were false alarms which frayed everyone's nerves.

Generally the night rambled on agreeably. Some snored rhythmically through the lesson, some played ha'penny nap quietly on the back benches, others read comic papers, a few baited the teachers, and a very few studied hard with visions of a manager's certificate, or a call to the ministry.

Moses applied his day-school technique to the night school. He just shut his mind to the lesson and read a well-thumbed book half-concealed under his exercise. It was a sixpenny book of "Side Splitting Jests" which he was digesting with grim application.

"Eh ooop," he said, soliciting help from his teacher. "What's this mean?"

"I'm afraid," sniffed the teacher, regarding the Side-Splitting Jests with disdain, "I'm afraid you're not following the lesson."

“’Appen not,” retorted Moses, “but it’s a guid book. Liss’n t’ this—”

For Moses had come to a great decision. He had found his mission in life. He was going to play the bones in a nigger minstrel troupe.

Meanwhile Dave was hanging around the station, concealing himself behind milk churns exactly as Sexton Blake would have done. The signal light blinked green; and soon the asthmatic panting of the train could be heard from the tunnel. Sexton Blake stiffened to attention, his hand on an imaginary trigger. The train rumbled in, settled down with a jerk, and a huge sigh of escaping steam. A short thick-set man stepped out of a compartment which had navy cushions instead of the dusty green of the third class. He carried a bag.

“Ha!” muttered Sexton Blake, “I will foil thee yet.”

“Boy,” called the Inspector imperiously, “Carry my bag.”

Dave looked at him stupidly.

“To the British School,” snapped the Inspector. “You know the British School, don’t you? Don’t you want to earn a penny?”

“I’m not going that way,” stammered Dave, twisting one leg behind the other.

The Inspector glared and picked up his bag. Dave shinned up the steps to the bridge, gained the road which crossed the railway at this point, and legged it for the school. He beat the Inspector by just five minutes.

“Aye, we had th’ Inspector reet enough,” said Moses, over the supper table that night. “He was a bit put out, too. Had to carry his bag up from t’sation hissen. Swore he’d asked a lad to carry it up, but he said he wasn’t going that way. ‘Such a stupid boy,’ he kept on saying.”

And Dave turned over a new white shilling which was burning a hole in his breeches pocket. Stupid, was he?

CHAPTER V

THE years slipped by. Enoch left school and joined his brother at the pit bank. Soon they were underground, driving the ponies that hauled tubs from coal face to shaft.

In the chill dawn, Mother Hubbard creaked carefully out of the big double bed, and padded down the steep narrow stair. Some sluts in the Rows lay abed and let their men-folk go to work half-clemmed. That was not her code. She stirred up the raked fire, threw on a few sticks and piled on the allowance coal. The kettle had stood on the hob all night and soon began to sing. She placed large slices of bacon in the iron frying-pan and cut thick chunks of her home-made bread. Then measuring five spoonfuls of tea in the pot, the standing allowance for four adults, and adding a little pinch of soda to bring out the strength, she mashed.

Again she mounted the stairs, and shook her three men till they came out of their stupor, and left them to drag on their pit clothes. The next few minutes were her very own. Pulling her chair up to the fire, she sat and warmed her knees, teemed her scalding tea into her saucer and blew on it, sipped it slowly, and was content. The first cup was the best of the day.

The men clumped down in their stockinged feet, almost whinnying with the cold, and clustered right round the grate, for a miner can stand any hardship but cold. While they ate, rapidly and silently, Mother Hubbard put up their snap. A huge sandwich, the middle layer a slice left over from the Sunday joint, for father. The lads had to content themselves with bread and jam. When jam went into father's snap tin instead of good butcher's meat, times in the coalfield were hard. She filled their tin flasks with strong sweet tea.

They shuffled along in silence, pit clogs ringing on the cobbles, their breath smoking in the chill morning air. In the siding they boarded the Paddy Mail, where Eli joined the elders who had secured a compartment with only one

broken window. They lit their shag and were silent together. The lads clustered together at the other end and teased and fought themselves warm. It was only a couple of miles to the pit bank. Little knots of men, some on foot, some by Paddy Mail, some on bicycles, converged on the pit head. The wheel of the winding gear was revolving, now this way, now that. The shift was going down. The men and boys drew their lamps from the lamp room, and waited for the cage. Only a thin streak of silver in the eastern sky relieved the monotonous sea of grey in which all were submerged.

Enoch shivered slightly. He wasn't afraid, but he never liked the sickening drop which left his stomach above ground while his body fell like a stone. Or the jar at the bottom he always prepared for but which always surprised him. It wasn't so bad afterwards. He sniffed the thick, warm air and whistled to Ginger. He thought he detected an answering whinny. Yes, Ginger knew him all right. He shoved a soft friendly nose into his pocket to see if he was hiding an apple. Ginger was a false 'un. Pity he couldn't run in the meadows.

Then followed a long exciting day in the dim galleries, wild rides with the empty tubs, ponies (not Ginger, of course) who jibbed and had to be beaten, wrestling with an overturned tub. Then after endless journeys, snap time. The sudden silence. Lamplight playing on glistening torsos as the hewers dropped where they had worked. The boys sprawled on the outskirts of the little group; in it, but not yet of it; finishing their snap before their elders had got going; and behind them little pin-points of light from beady eyes as the mice waited for the crumbs. There were not many crumbs.

The snatches of conversation after snap, and the glorious feeling of inclusion in the grown-up group. Liberty to spit and to swear in reason. They were shocked once or twice in spite of their upbringing in the Rows, but the older men's 'Nah then,' and a nod in their direction drew the line.

These were the men they knew in broadcloth passing the plate at Ebenezer on Sundays or singing in Top Chapel

choir. There were others, too, who lurched out of the Red Lion on Saturday nights and had their heads cracked on the pavement by the bobby before they'd go quietly. Yet in sweaty singlets, Enoch saw them as men and brothers. Some a little more bawdy in their talk than others, but all doing a hard, dangerous job without shirking.

They would argue about the last whippet or pigeon race, the last football match, and the last sermon. They hummed music-hall songs and hymns without discrimination. The most devout hymn singers were the backsliders.

"The'knows, John Henry, thy tenors were flat on that high C."

"'Appen. And 'appen not. If tha'd got old Aaron in *thy* choir . . ."

"Nivver thee mind. He'll none last for ever. He'll be putting t'Heavenly choir out of tune before long. And there's too many courting couples i'th'choir singing out o'th' same buik. It stands to sense, you conna get your deep chest notes if you're standing sideways yearning into a wench's eyes."

"What can I do? Ta'e the long view, man, ta'e the long view. If there's no giving and taking in marriage, what's going to happen to our Sunday School Anniversary?"

They contemplated this problem gravely.

"That was a fine rousing sermon the Reverend David Jones gave us last Sunday. Without a note."

"I missed it. I wor speaking the word at Moor Lane."

"You missed summat. He's got the gift."

"It was a queer text he took."

"Queer? I didna think it queer, though I conna call it to mind now."

"Our Joe told me. I promised to skelp him if he played truant from church again, so I took partickler care to ask him the text. Our Joe's a sad lad, but he conna tell a lie."

"And what text did your Joe say it was?"

"*'Behold,'*" quoted his father, unctuously, "*'I was not there.'*" Now, would that be Isaiah?"

Then the pit awoke again, the mice scampered back to

their holes, picks rang out, and the tubs rumbled away in the tunnels. Working and sweating through the long afternoon. And then home to find tea on the table, a knife and fork tea as became men, to fall asleep in their dirt as soon as the last mouthful was bolted, to wake refreshed, to stand half-naked at the sink and scrub and sluice themselves till their skins shone, to bend an arm ever so slowly until a small ball of muscle was as hard as a cricket ball.

"Feel that now," they said proudly.

John and Dave felt these protuberances gravely.

Then a compact fist was pushed under their small noses.

"Smell o' that," they were commanded.

Sometimes the elder lads tossed their juniors an extra Saturday penny which was spent on Uncle Luke's Humbugs or Mother Jolley's Gob Stoppers. But more often, they felt the need of gob-stoppers themselves. They still had a sweet tooth.

Mother Hubbard wasn't unhappy. She was busy and she liked to be useful. And how her brood used her! John and Dave could run her errands so there was no need for her to go out twice a day with her string bag, but she was still on her feet all day. Nobody helped her in the home. A colliery clerk might beat a carpet or wash up, a miner did nothing in the house. If his wife was laid up, he simply sat while a neighbour flounced about, got his meal ready, and tidied up. So her feet became swollen and heavy and her figure sagged. Nobody minded. Every miner's wife went shapeless like that. It was a law of nature.

But she had more money to spend. It is a Saint Martin's summer for the working-man's wife when the struggle to keep five on a wage designed for one is relieved. It wouldn't last, she knew. The boys were growing independent. Soon they'd want to pay board instead of tipping up. If it didn't occur to them, some saucy wench would put them up to it. They'd want to save, and when boys want to save, a mother knows exactly what is going on in the dusk of the countryside.

For the present, there was enough, and she saw that it

went in their bellies and not on their backs. Sometimes she even dreamed of escape from the Rows into one of those houses in Slater Street with a bay window just big enough to hold an aspidistra, and a backyard she would have all to herself. She dreamed of a tiny parlour—"The Room" they called it in Northedge—so that when her eldest came home shyly with his girl, she could say, "Take her into the Room, Moses." Her lips used to frame this sentence silently, and another which ran, "This is my son's wife." Although she hated the idea of another woman "doing for" her sons, she knew that great lusty lads grew quickly into men, and it was only right and proper they should have homes of their own.

It was not far off, she realised. Moses and Enoch had reached the dandy stage. They used glossy, smelly stuff on their hair. They refused to wear the reach-me-downs from the Co-op, and insisted on violently blue suits, pinched in at the waist, with a large V-shape cut in their waistcoats, and they were very particular about outside seams and buttons. Wearing this uniform, they paraded High Street on Saturday nights until they 'clicked,' and then balanced themselves precariously on the kerb while they wrestled in small talk with the girls they had picked up. Always in couples, one shy and one cheeky, with eyes like dark pools under the shadows of their hats, mysterious and desirable. There were raw gaps in the conversation. These encounters always ended with a wild scurry to get home by nine o'clock, for fathers were strict in Northedge.

Moses went further. He began to make mysterious excursions every Wednesday to Nottingham. He kept his own counsel and was more oafish than usual when questions were asked. Once in Nottingham, he walked in a purposeful way to the Victoria Hall. At the pay-box he handed over a small sum, for he had demanded and won the right to pay for his course of dancing lessons by instalments, received his pumps which had been lodged as security, and went into the main hall. The Professor into whose hands he had now passed was a plump little man with a peppery turn of speech.

"*One, two, three ; one, two, three.* Try again. It's a circular dance. Don't you know what a circle is?" And diving into his pocket, he fished out a penny. "That's a circle. Now, again. *One, two three ; one, two, three.*"

The blasé woman in the shabby sealskin coat and picture hat sat down at the grand piano and churned out "The Merry Widow Waltz." Seizing Moses, the Professor spun him round until the room blurred and his senses reeled. Then, leaving him gripping a chair, watching the floor rock, and the doors and windows chase each other in a mad frenzy, the Professor whirled the next pupil round.

Moses decided to stay for the beginners' dance. Twenty demure maidens sat on one side of the room, twenty uneasy bloods played with handkerchiefs and ties on the opposite side.

"Choose your partners for the waltz," chirruped the Professor.

Twenty uneasy youths ventured across the glassy floor, and stammered the well-rehearsed phrases of invitation, crooked an arm, and were surprised and relieved at the swift acceptance.

The blasé pianist crashed into the waltz. Away on the treacherous surface they sped, anxious-eyed, with teeth set, and full of grim determination to have a good time.

"Ripping floor, don't you think?" Moses heard one man say. Showing off, thought Moses, who found *one, two, three ; one, two, three* as much as he could manage. When would the blamed piano stop?

He was conscious that floors and walls as well as dancers were spinning. His head swam twice as quickly as his feet. But the merry widow still rattled on.

"Must—siddown—giddy," he panted to his partner.

"All right," she agreed, with obvious relief.

But he felt himself falling—falling. His feet slid, and he skidded diagonally across the room, dragging his partner with him. Into the crowd of inexperienced dancers he shot, cleaving them to right and left, until he came to rest amid a grand pyramid of hot humanity. The Merry

Widow petered out ; the Professor flew to the scene of disaster. There were many recriminations.

"What you ought to do," advised his partner, when he'd dusted her and mumbled an apology, "is to practise at home. With a kitchen stool. Now you can buy me an ice and we'll say no more about it."

This seemed to Moses a sound idea. A fellow knew where he was with a stool. He didn't have to sit out with it and talk rot about the floor, and it couldn't sponge on him for ices.

The next night, Mother Hubbard heard burglars. She was afraid of no man, but burglars were somewhat different. She woke up her husband.

"Burglars!" she hissed.

"Nay," he said, "I hear nowt," and he dug his head in the pillow and went to sleep.

She clicked her tongue and got out of bed, groping her way to the landing.

"Enoch," she whispered.

"Wharz matter?"

"Burglars," she replied.

Enoch breathed hard.

"Let 'em come to-morrow," he threatened, "I'll be ready for 'em."

"Drat the men," she muttered, groping her way downstairs.

When she reached the crack of the kitchen door she saw Moses solemnly waltzing round with a kitchen chair.

"Absolutely ripping floor," she heard him say, as he whirled the chair around. "Would you like an ice?"

"Mad as a hatter," she grunted, as she groped her way back to bed. "He never did take after me. That's a bit of his feyther coming out."

The week-end was Mother Hubbard's time. She looked forward to it eagerly, even though she knew what a relief Monday would be when the house would be her own again. With good money being earned, the half-day shift on Saturday was hardly worth getting up for, and many of the miners 'played.'

Eli knotted his coloured scarf meticulously, perched his cap at a rakish angle, lit his pipe and set off for the countryside, little Abby trotting behind him like a young puppy. Moses lay abed, and when he was goaded downstairs, lounged about in his shirt sleeves and got in the way. John and Dave were out of the house the moment they had gobbled their breakfast, on some mysterious business of their own. Enoch was more purposeful.

He dressed himself in his best, went into the yard, and resting one foot at a time on the water-butt, put a brave shine on his boots. He informed the saucy baggage who was slopping the steps next door that it was a fine day.

"*You've not seen much of it,*" she replied pertly.

He grimaced swiftly, remembering too late he was grown up. When he was quite spick and span, he went indoors and put an arm round his mother.

"Lemme go!" she cried.

But he didn't. He rubbed his cheek against hers.

"Cupboard love," she snorted. "What dost 'a want?"

"There's a match at Trent Bridge, Mam."

"Then be off with you. You and your bat an' ball."

"What about a bit of snap?"

So she packed him up a parcel of food.

"Have you got your sixpence?" she asked.

"Aye," he admitted. "But there's the fare. I'm a bit short like—"

"Easy come, easy go, with thee, lad. Eh, well. I dunno where I can lay my hand on a shilling—"

"There's one under the brass candlestick, Mam."

"That's the gas, and you can't ha'e it."

From inside the clock, she unearthed sixpence.

"It'll ha'e to do, lad. Thee mun walk across close to the trams. A bit of a walk won't hut 'ee."

"Fower miles," he grumbled. "Ha'e a look in thy work-basket, Mam."

"What's my work-basket to do wi' thee?" she snapped. "Poking in my work-basket! What next? That's the bit I've saved to put me away decent, and there it bides. Not

a word to *him* bout it, mind. If he goes on one of his bouts—”

They all knew Mother Hubbard's hiding places, but they were as safe as the Bank of England. Enoch grinned and set off on foot. In the Main Street, he paused before a sweet shop, turning his money over in his pocket in the hope that two sixpences would change miraculously into one and six. Still, he had a few coppers, and wondered whether to buy quality in 'Uncle Luke's Humbugs,' or quantity in Gop Stoppers. He decided on gob-stoppers which were hard, round balls with a satisfying pear-drop flavour. With a protuberance in his cheek, he took the cinder-track across the scarred countryside.

Once in the country, he forgot his adult dignity, and, with his ashplant, slashed the heads of countless nettles past imaginary coverpoints. Then, weary of easy boundaries, he picked up stones from the rough track, and with a thirty-yards run, with a hop, skip and a jump in the middle (copied faithfully from Bill Hitch) he hurled wicked break-backs at phantom batsmen. A solitary farm-labourer looked up from his work when he heard a yell of " 'S That? "

" Drat them boys," he growled, and went on hoeing.

Trent Bridge at last. Pleasantly tired, Enoch lay prone on the dried grass of the sixpenny side, and listened to the musical thud of bat on ball that drifted to him a second after the stroke had been made. He decided to ask Dave why he could see it before he could hear the stroke. Dave knew things like that.

Young George Gunn, flicking them wristily through the covers ; A. O. Jones, with hands like carpet bags in the slips ; Oates with his Gothic legs, surely designed by his maker for a wicket-keeper.

He pencilled the score on a card of the match, and sucked George Hirst's Yorkshire Toffee which was hawked at a penny a tin. Gone is George, compact ball of Yorkshire pudding and sunshine. And gone, too, are those round whitened balls of Yorkshire Toffee, as honest and sweet as their maker. Enoch sprawled in the hot afternoon

sunshine, studying Topsy Wass in action, and dreaming of the day when he, too, would sling down sizzlers from his full height. A crackle of applause aroused him. The batsman had pulled a short one, square-leg couldn't reach it, and the ball was bounding along straight towards Enoch. He leaped to his feet, got both hands to it, and was about to toss it to the nearest fielder when he had an inspiration. He *bowled* it back to the wicket-keeper in his best style. He blushed furiously at a tinkle of ironical applause from neighbouring small boys, but inside he was seething with excitement. He had bowled his first ball at Trent Bridge.

Enoch walked home on air. He reached the Toll Bar just as the wagonette bringing home the Northedge eleven was pulling up at the Red Lion. The team had broken into melancholy song. Squire's son, rector's son, school-master, clerks and pit lads all raising uncertain voices requesting Bill Bailey to come home.

Back again to an enormous tea, Moses reading out the scores of the other matches from the Late Final, while Enoch used his knife to show how George Gunn cut them past the cake stand. Then there was more scrubbing and hair polishing, and the lads had to go out. It was now dusk and the lamplighter was poking the gas jets into flame with his pole. The pit hill gleamed phosphorescently. Girls moved like moths in the shadows, silently with only the swish of a skirt. Little gusts of masculine laughter as the doors of the Red Lion swung open. A puff of hot oily air from the fish-and-chip shop, full to overflowing with waiting customers. The Saturday night promenade had begun.

Sunday spelled peace. The winding gear ceased to revolve, the trucks in the siding were still. Men sat on the steps in their shirt sleeves (and how clean they were) while the housewives grew hot before their kitchen fires, stoked to cook the Sunday joint and the Yorkshire pudding.

Clumping sounds from upstairs as the laggards rose.

"Mam, where's my shirt?"

"Can I ha'e my clean socks?"

"They're theer ready to put your feet in."

"Not them. The purple 'uns."

"Fancy thysen in them, don't you? Wait till the colour starts to run."

"Mam, what hast 'a done wi' my new tie?"

And so it went on. One by one they drifted off, some in broadcloth and squeaking boots to hear the word at Ebenezer, others to stroll idly sucking a twig or an old pipe over the bridle road to the moors.

Back on the dot for the Sunday joint. H-bone it was, flanked with baked potatoes, and served with Yorkshire pudding. Father Hubbard asked a blessing while the youngsters stuffed spoons in their mouths because they couldn't wait. Mother, in a tent-like apron, carved and served and grew redder than ever. She could barely eat a mouthful after standing in front of that oven all day, but she flapped the corner of her apron as a fan and watched her brood take its fill. Then she drove them out while she washed up, the three youngest to Sunday School, the two eldest to Bible class, while Eli tucked the 'News of the World' under his arm and went in his stockinged feet to lie down upstairs.

She had barely time to loosen her stays and snatch a nod on the old sofa before tea had to be prepared. And tea in Northedge was a meal of consequence. A wife was judged by her Sunday teas. The table had to groan beneath tongue, ham, tinned salmon, two kinds of cake, three kinds of jam, and a choice selection of tam-taffs. Stray members of the Hubbard clan dropped in, protested they couldn't stay, but nevertheless always tucked their legs under the kitchen table. It was a day of reunion, the only day in the week when news of the outside world seeped into that little circle.

Uncle Alfred sometimes brought a whiff of city air along with a smell of mild and bitter. He regarded Northedge over a rampart of stiff collar, and lifting the tails of his coat delicately, he would brag of the marvels of the British Empire as though he had invented it. He knew the other Empire rather more intimately and had drunk bottled stout with every top-liner who had trod the boards. If

children had not been present, he indicated, he could say a lot more.

Eli scorned him. "There's nowt about him," he decided. Abby drew a picture of him with moustaches, screwed to a point, which stuck out yards. Only Dave really admired him. He was going to live in town like Uncle Alfred when he grew up. No, the Hubbards didn't cotton on to him. He wasn't really a Hubbard. He only had a marriage qualification. It was considered that Aunt Agnes had a lot to put up with.

But visitors said good-night for the third and last time, and there was a blessed interval of peace when Mother Hubbard could sit in her black Bombazine best and watch her lads out of the corner of her eye. In half an hour now they'd be ready for supper. Cold beef, cold potatoes, and a slab of cold Yorkshire pudding with cheese to follow for those who were still hungry.

Her mouth twitched as she watched. She was saying to herself. "Will you take her into the Room, Moses?" "This is my son's wife." Life wasn't too bad in Northedge in 1911.

CHAPTER VI

MOTHER HUBBARD's days of quiet content were numbered. The torrid summer of 1911 with its echoes of far-off dock-strikes was trying. But it was the heat of the kitchen which bothered Mother Hubbard.

Round the dock gates of Liverpool and London the ragged army clustered waiting for work. The overlooker ran a calculating eye over the human cattle, casting a nod at this hefty Irish immigrant, or that brawny English countryman until he had picked his team. Then the gates were slammed on the grey-haired, the misfits, and the human wreckage that shrank from the overlooker's appraising eye. And this flotsam and jetsam had dared to rebel.

Eli read about it in his Sunday paper. "This Tom Mann is a firebrand and all," he decided.

It meant nothing to Northedge. Life went on much as usual, only the wages they tipped up on the Friday night seemed to get smaller. More dirt in the pit, and dirt took just as much getting as coal but only the coal was paid for. There was a magic formula for setting this right. *Minimum Wage* it was called. You could hear it often when you passed the Toll Bar after dusk or stepped into the lather-scented fug of the barber's. If they only had the minimum wage all would be well.

John was working on the pit bank now. Mother Hubbard had fought for him and Eli had given way. He was to have his chance above ground. But John ruined her hopes. He wanted to be a collier and he was going to be one. Enoch was turning out regularly for the Northedge team, and the Old Standards who sat under the chestnut tree near the refreshments decided he was a likely lad. Not so good as Topsy Wass at his age, but he was coming on. Moses went on his solitary way, impervious to ridicule, scolding and questioning. He had now mastered the bones. If he could add a merry jest or two, a song, and a tap dance, it would make a real act. When his voice broke its moorings and finally came to anchor, it promised to be such a deep and fruity organ that the choirmaster of Top Chapel invited him to join the basses. Moses didn't mind joining the basses. His difficulty was to stay with them, especially when they went against the current. Still, he was willing to learn, and fought off agonies of shyness when the choir stood up with a quiet rustle to sing an anthem. And when they rustled back to their seats, he sat through the sermon dreaming how Mo Hubbard's Act at the Nottingham Empire knocked 'em. Knocked 'em flat.

Top Chapel was doing *The Messiah* that year. They always did the Messiah, and so did Ebenezer and Bottom Chapel. But that year Top Chapel had first knock. Although the remaining five places of worship opened their doors as usual, only the very faithful passed through. The few bowed their shiny heads or nodded their bonnets until

the beads jingled, and called out during the prayer louder than usual lest the Almighty should miss their shrill responses in all that racket from Top Chapel.

The many pressed along Main Street to the stone-built chapel at the end of Northedge. Inside, the organ made the ingratiating noises that only an organ can make. Sidesmen in frock coats, stiff with politeness, waved the worshippers to the left or right. Speech sank to whispers. Progress down the aisle was made on tip-toe, and the creaking of Sunday boots mingled with the *vox humana* of the organ. The worshippers slipped into their pews, covered their faces with black-gloved hands, and having prayed without bowing the knee, a Catholic trick that, peered round to see what their neighbours were wearing. The doors at the back of the organ-loft opened, and the choir entered, men from the left, ladies from the right. The men entered with self-conscious dignity, the women with modest self-assurance.

"There's our Maudemma. The saucy madam."

"Miss Askin made it, crepe merle. It took two and three-quarters, double width. Hush!"

"That's her boy among the tenors. Will Bra'shaw's oldest. Third from the end."

"Of course she conna sing. It's only because her feyther's a steward."

"Hush. You nivver know who's sitting behind you."

The band entered, as unconcerned as only a band can be, for on special occasions the organ was reinforced by a clarinet, a 'cello, and a big bass. Old Bill wiped his moustache and stripped the green baize cover from his instrument. The choirmaster stood up limply and tapped with his baton.

"Ready," he whispered to the band.

"Thee mun wait a minute, lad," growled Bill audibly.

"Ah've not tuned up yet. Gi'e us t'note, John Henry."

The baton waved, and the choir broke into full-throated chorus. Grey-bearded ancients piped a tremulous treble and put the tenors out of their somewhat strangled stride. The contraltos (the local press referred to them as contralti)

lost their parts and were swept away on a rising soprano tide. The basses growled heroically. They showed how Handel should be sung.

Soon a slight difference was felt between the organ and the choir. Seduced by their own strains, the choir lingered lovingly over each phrase. The choirmaster beat time with them beautifully. He knew that in the middle of a chorus it was useless to go on in front. The organist had not his ripe philosophy. He set his eye-glasses firmly on his nose, pulled out the diapason, winked at Old Bill and led off briskly.

Old Bill, who played in a music hall every weekday, could take a cue as well as the next man.

"Ah mun rub a belly, John Henry," he murmured in a low but penetrating voice, proceeding to lay on his bow. Between them they jerked the choir out of its gentle pace.

The chapel grew hotter. The choirmaster drew a red silk handkerchief from the rear of his person and mopped his face. By this time the choir was drunk with song. They sang ecstatically, with heads flung back, and heaving breasts. They dominated the choirmaster, the organist and even Old Bill. The young man who wrote the 'Northedge Notes' in the local paper sought for the *mot juste* and decided to call it a powerful performance.

At the psychological moment the collection was taken. Silver poured on the baize-covered wooden platters, while the stewards, having started these on the way, stood with aloof eyes reading the texts stencilled on the ceiling. The congregation sat with eyes resolutely facing the pulpit. What passed from one's pocket to the plate was a matter for the individual conscience. Yet if the schoolmaster put in less than half-a-crown, the whole village discussed the scandal over Monday's wash-tubs.

Mrs. Hubbard, brave in her shiny black, sat in the last pew but one.

"Eh, dear," she sighed to herself. "That's my son."

Work, play, and chapel. So life went on. And then one day there was no work. The formula *Minimum Wage* had to be fought for. Eli attended his lodge meetings and

always voted with the speaker "who gan mesters the stick," but when the final ballot was taken, he voted against a stoppage. It was too late then. The younger men were spoiling for a fight. Their whole life was a fight. A compromise worked out by patient committee work didn't appeal to them. You didn't compromise with coal. Either you got it or it got you.

The women bore it philosophically. "Men mun play sometimes," they said. Miners never take a holiday; they 'play.' Dressed in their best in bell-bottomed trousers and gaudy scarves, they sat on their haunches at the Toll Bar, or rolled off with their bandy miner's gait into the countryside. Soon they knew the note of every bird, could name every plant and tree, and were caustic critics of lazy farmers. Their faces lost the dead pallor of the underground workers. They sunned themselves, slept, and renewed their vigour.

But there was a note of bitterness in this strike, which marked it off from those friendly local fixtures when the old Colonel cracked a joke with his own strikers at the Toll Bar. The courtesies of warfare were dropped, one by one. Miners' meetings were held in the Methodist School Room. In days the Old Standards remembered, they used to begin as strike meetings and end as prayer meetings. But not to-day. There was more said about Socialism and even Syndicalism than the dignity of labour.

The kitchen fire which was never raked died out. The 'allowance' had gone and Mother Hubbard relied on the odd lumps the boys could scrape together from the pit bank. Shaly stuff with a sulphurous smell, but it burned. Some of the lads stole lumps from the wagons in the siding.

Strike pay was cut to the bone. Even the pittance the old men drew from the Union was stopped. The officials handed back their salaries to the strike fund. Belts were drawn tighter. The school children got one meal a day at a soup kitchen opened at the Prims, but they were always hungry.

"Tha 'art a wonder, woman," said Eli, dragging up his

chair to the table, and beginning to eat. "I'm fair clemmed."

"Steady on," she whispered anxiously. "There's little mouths to feed."

Eli stopped plying his knife and fork.

"And what about thee?" he said.

"I've had mine," sighed Mother Hubbard wanly. "'Afore I dished up."

"'Appen," said her man. "God, a mon's ashamed to eat these days. To think on't. I've hewed in the darkness under the earth all my days, and now I conna afford to eat."

The Co-op. allowed credit, the small shopkeepers allowed a little more, the slate at the club was full, the old folks went on the Parish. The riotous games at football and cricket which had made the early days of the strike such a lark had died down. Football wore out boots and clothes, and you couldn't stand up to a charge when you had an empty space where your stomach ought to be. Only the pit ponies rejoiced in their freedom. They trembled when they were brought up and were blind as bats, but now they were sleek and fat and full of mischief. *They* got enough to eat.

At last, up in London, a settlement was hammered out. Between the mine-owners and miners the nimble politicians scurried "finding a formula." Finally a solution which could be hailed as a victory by owners, miners and statesmen was agreed, and back went the miners to water-logged pits; back to their offices went the owners to raid concealed reserves to soothe their shareholders; back to their parliamentary sham fights went the politicians.

The wheels of industry creaked slowly round again. Once more the Hubbards' grate was piled high with allowance coal. Once more the pantry held food. Mother Hubbard sagged a little more and there were two new lines at the corner of her mouth, but nobody noticed these. And she lay awake all night scheming to pay off her debt to the grocer, the butcher and the milkman. She must contrive it somehow, or Dave, too, would be sucked into the pit.

Moses, Enoch, John—three sons had been swallowed up by the pit, to spend their lives in the dim underworld, to be spewed up when the life had been sucked out of them, to drift aimlessly about, broken-bodied old men waiting until they would go underground for the last time. She must save Dave and Abby at all costs. But help was on its way.

The schoolmaster picked a path cautiously through the puddles of Long Row. He asked a small boy to direct him to Mrs. Hubbard's, and Dave and Abby hearing this, didn't stay to wonder what they had done, but took to their heels. The small boy directed him importantly to No. 42. Mrs. Hubbard wiped her hands on her apron, for she was baking, and dusted a chair for him.

"It's about David," he began.

"What's he been doing?" she demanded.

"Nothing," he explained. "At least not more than usual. It's what he might do if he tried. I want him to sit for a scholarship."

"A scholarship!" she echoed.

"It means two years at the Secondary School. It may not end there. If he won a further scholarship he could have two more years. He might even get as far as the University. How would you like a son who could put B.A. after his name, Mrs. Hubbard?"

"Dave will nivver mak' a parson."

She thought all B.A.'s were parsons.

"No. But he might do almost anything. He might become a teacher. All sorts of doors will open to him. Now I know it won't be easy. His school fees and books will be paid for, but you would have to clothe him and keep him. Do you think you could manage it?"

"Manage it?" she echoed, "I'd work my fingers to the bone to manage it."

"I'm very glad you take it like that, Mrs. Hubbard. You can't imagine what trouble I have persuading parents to give their sons a chance. He'll have to work hard. Homework, you know."

"I'll ma'e him work, mester."

"Then that's settled. I hope he'll be a credit to you. Good-night."

And as he picked his way gingerly back along the Rows, he muttered, "I'll show the chairman we can win scholarships from my school. Blaming me, indeed. God, what a hole to live in."

Old Eli took it very well.

"Want to make a shiny-arsed clerk out of him, dost'a. I nivver thowt as flesh of my flesh would want to polish his backside on an office stool. Still, it's nowt to do wi' me."

Dave was secretly thrilled at the news, and worked like a black for a couple of weeks. Then the lamplight lured him back to the rough, wild life of the Rows.

"Very well," said Mother Hubbard grimly, "Tha'll tell mester in t'morning that you'll none sit for his scholarship. I'll begin to get thy pit clo'es together."

But Dave didn't want to go down the pit. He promised to work, and every night, as soon as the table was cleared, he sat in the lamplight, breathing hard, and grinding at his books. It wasn't easy studying in a room which was kitchen, bakery, nursery, dining-room and even dressing-room at one and the same time, although the family played up nobly. They didn't interrupt or tease him. In fact, Eli complained that he wasn't allowed to speak in his own house; but he managed quite well with husky whispers which must have carried right across to Bottom Row. Abby was a real help. He worked side by side with Dave just because he liked books, and to satisfy Abby's clear intelligence, Dave had to know what he was talking about. Mother Hubbard beamed approvingly over her darning. Life was good again.

But not quite so good. Something had gone wrong in 1912. Northedge was no longer a rowdy but healthy family community. A crack ran from top to bottom of its social structure. Just a crack at the moment. The young men from the Hall no longer played in the village cricket team. They went off in one of those new-fangled cars to play golf. Further down the scale, the under-managers and surveyors moved from Slater Street and built themselves

little villas surrounded by privet hedges on the edge of the countryside. The men had one more weekly deduction recorded on their pay-notices. They were no longer 'sacked.' They were told to 'take their card.' When they went to the doctor, they had to use the side entrance and wait in the lobby reserved for panel patients. Where Northedge was once split into the godly and the ungodly: it was now splitting into rich and poor. The common interest of coal remained; not so much the winning of coal as the winning of dividends and the earning of wages. A harsher material spirit ruled over Northedge.

Dave sat for his examination and was in due course declared successful. The schoolmaster made rather a fuss about it, and Dave had to stand up before the school while the boys clapped him and thought of various interesting tortures they would inflict on him later, the little swank. And on Friday his name was in the paper. It was the first time any Hubbard had his name in the paper, except Uncle John who was once sent down the line for hitting a policeman while under the influence, and Uncle John's brief fame didn't count. Dave was swollen with pride.

Mother Hubbard's mind flew to the practical problem. Her son had to attend the Secondary School in a few weeks and he had to go decent. For years she had cut down and patched the outgrown clothes of the elders. The youngsters expected nothing better. Their clothes were decent, they were whole, they were warm, and they didn't cramp a lad's style like Sunday clothes did. Every day was a Sunday to a Secondary School boy.

Mother Hubbard took advice. She dressed herself in her best one Wednesday afternoon, ignored the Row which plainly indicated that she was a bit above herself, and took tea with Mrs. Meacham, the butcher's wife. She had often been asked to drop in for a dish of tea but she didn't like visiting. She felt more comfortable at her own hearth. But to-day she had business to transact. She must find out what clothes Dave had to wear so that he could hold his head up. There were no psychological articles in the papers of those days to tell mothers that their children were

clothes-conscious. She just knew they had to be as like as peas or they wouldn't fit in. Even Abby, who loved bright, colourful things, shrank from wearing anything different when he went to school.

Mrs. Meacham made her welcome, and gave her a complete list of all the things Dave must have and the shops from which they could be obtained. It seemed incredible to Mother Hubbard that a lad of thirteen should want so much. These clothes would have to be bought and paid for. Eli wouldn't help. "Dressing him up like little Lord Fauntleroy," he would sneer.

But Mother Hubbard couldn't afford Mrs. Meacham's prices. She persuaded Uncle Alfred to bring her a length of smooth black cloth from his warehouse at wholesale (Uncle Alfred loved to buy things wholesale, or bully a shopkeeper into a discount). She took it to Tom Howarth in the Bottom Row who worked in a clothing factory, and used to do a bit on his own to make ends meet. So Dave was able to see his suit grow under his own eyes and went to try on every night. It fitted like a glove, and when he had put it on and had wrestled with, and conquered, an Eton collar, Mother Hubbard said he looked a picture. The other lads called him "Sir!" with elaborate irony. Dave wriggled uncomfortably and wanted to get back into his old suit.

"Keep it on," commanded Mother Hubbard. "Let thy feyther see it. He'll be home any minute."

He had got to see it, and she might as well get it over.

Old Eli stood in the doorway and shaded his eyes with his hand as if this splendid vision dazzled him.

"*They toil not neither do they spin,*" he quoted, "*yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like—*"

"That's enough," snapped his wife. "He's going to ha'e his chance."

"Aye," agreed Eli. "He'll ha'e his chance. Listen, lad, now tha's gotten thy collar on, see tha' keeps it on. It's the mon wi' collar who gets the brass. Nivver forget that."

CHAPTER VII

THE war came to Northedge, not with the tattoo of drums and the hoarse bark of the parade ground. One or two reservists disappeared overnight, Mr. Baxter exhibited a placard outside his shop which the boys spelled out, "*To Hell with Serbia*," there were one or two recruiting speeches. But Northedge went on with its work. It lived for coal, thought about coal, talked coal, ate coal, it risked its life for coal. It thought sojering was soft.

At school the boys were taught that all war was evil except, of course, this particular war. The Head hung an impressive map of Europe on the wall on which Germany was a bilious yellow, France was green, and the British Isles pink, colours indelibly impressed on the mind of youth so that Dave, visiting Germany long years after was amazed when the green countryside of France did not change into a yellow at the frontier.

This map broke into a rash of little flags which were moved eagerly forward or more reluctantly backward as the campaign got into its stride. The staff had a rush of strategy to the head and if the war could have been won by little flags, Germany would have been wiped from the map in no time. Yet the real thing lingered on.

One by one the younger teachers disappeared from school and were replaced by matrons who let the boys do what they liked so long as they did it quietly. The Head served on a lot of committees, and often slipped out in the afternoon and school became a pandemonium.

Young men came back to Northedge, brave in uniform, with red faces, full lips and bright buttons, and wherever they went, you may be sure the girls went too. In couples, elaborately unconcerned about the young men in khaki. But they were drawn to them as iron to the magnet, and they drifted off together on the bridle tracks to the moors.

Every mother with a grown-up son watched his comings and goings and hoped he wouldn't take the King's shilling, but were proud of him when he did. Colliers weren't

expected to go, but you couldn't blame a recruiting sergeant for snapping them up.

But Uncle Alfred didn't go. He'd come in on Saturday nights, dolled up with a waterproof stand-up collar and a dicky which never even pretended to be part of a shirt. His moustaches were pulled out as far as they would stretch and were twisted into points. In his younger days he was a 'masher.'

"Non joined up yet?" asked Eli, who didn't like the fellow.

"Without the word of a lie," declared Uncle Alfred with deep conviction, "I'd like nothing better. To die facing fearful odds for me country—hic. But you know these medical boards, Eli. They're hard-hearted. They take no account of a man's spirit. If he's got so much as a hammer-toe, they won't have him."

"Have you got a hammer-toe? First I've heard of it."

"If Nelson," continued Uncle Alfred scorning the interruption, had offered his services to these—er—children being present—these—er—medical boards, do you know what they'd have done? Turned him down. Turned down the little bloke that won the battle of—what was it he won, boys? Come on. All this schooling I pay for. Trafalgar. That's right. And you can bet your boots the man who could win this war is sitting at 'ome, eating his heart out, just because the perishing Medical Board found a suspicion of a hammer-toe."

"Let's have a look at your toe, Uncle," suggested Enoch brightly.

"The sight of maimed and crippled limbs is not for the young," said Uncle Alfred portentously. "I hide my secret shame in my heart . . ."

"In your shoes, you mean."

"And," continued Uncle Alfred, "If England despises my poor gifts, if England thinks she can muddle through without my help, then England deserves what she'll get—hic."

When the casualty lists began to lengthen, Northedge revised its opinion that soldiering was a soft job. Moses

and Enoch heard the insistent beat of the drum, but Mother Hubbard, her lips twitching, though she tried to keep them tight, said they were not to go. They must wait until they were men. But she heard them whispering in bed at nights and knew she had only gained a respite.

Stories were told at the Red Lion of men sent in their civilian suits to bleak camps on the East Anglian clay, to drill with dummy rifles, and to sleep in icy huts. The dread words 'Spotted Fever' were whispered. "Make a man or break him," said the old soldiers. Many were broken.

But in the Spring of 1915, Enoch and Moses set off with Ike Severn to Derby to do their bit for King and Country. They expected to be welcomed, although they didn't want a fuss making over them. That was why they hadn't joined up when the Recruiting Van came round, and pretty ladies beckoned them up to the platform.

"Well, you've come at last, 'ave you?" grunted the sergeant. He sat at a trestle table with elbows squared and dug his pen like a bayonet into the official forms. A cigarette was stuck behind his ear.

"Name?" he demanded.

"Ike Severn."

"Say it again, and say 'sergeant' when you speak to me."

Ike said it again.

"Spell it."

Ike spelled it.

"Religion?"

Ike shuffled.

"Haven't got one. Don't go nowhere."

"Come off it," said the sergeant. "Must have a religion. C. of E."

"Nay," exclaimed Ike stubbornly. "Nivver been to church in my life."

"But what am I to put on the blinking form? I got to put something, haven't I?"

"I've tould thee what to put."

"Sergeant-Major!"

"What's up now?" barked a still ruddier figure in uniform.

"This bloke," stabbing his pen at Ike, "says he's got no religion. What the 'ell am I to put down?"

"C. of E., of course."

"But he won't let me."

"Now look here, my lad," said the sergeant-major in his most fatherly manner. "We're having no bloody atheists in the Second-Sixth, and don't you forget it. This is a 'Oly War, this is. Didn't Bottomley tell the troops so last Sunday?"

"Lot of fuss about nowt," grumbled Ike.

"How do we know how to parade you on Sundays if we don't know your damn religion? Take my tip and make it C. of E. No damage done, and you'll want somebody to put you away decent if you stop a bullet. Besides, you don't get any good out of dodging church parade. Fatigue. That's what you get. Privvies—"

"All right," said Ike. "What's that there place you go to, Moses? Prims? Put me down same, Sergeant."

"Prim. Meth.," wrote the sergeant, "and why the hell couldn't you say so at first?"

The forms were completed without further hitch, they laboriously signed their names, and were taken into the next room where they took the Oath of Allegiance to the King and his Heirs, and received the King's shilling. This was rather impressive. They were now soldiers.

Then clad only in socks, they were passed into medical inspection, dumped on iron scales and weighed, measured, told to read a chart at the end of the room, were cracked over the knee, thumped over the heart and were told to cough. A civilian doctor who moved with a feline grace, ran over them with his stethoscope, and marked their papers disdainfully.

"Take these to the Colonel," he commanded.

They laid their documents before the truculent little man at the desk. He looked them up and down like a cautious cattle dealer. For the first time they felt

obtrusively naked. They were passed A1, which, being interpreted, meant Active Service Abroad.

Mother Hubbard took it very well. Her mouth twitched whenever she thought of her lads away in camp, but they were out of the pit. That was something. For a month or two they would grow hard and strong in the fresh air. She daren't think why they were being made hard and strong.

Both boys allotted their mother sixpence a day, and instructed her to claim a separation allowance. She had to fill up a form for each of them, but after studying the questions grimly, said, "They can keep their blood money."

"Nay, lass," advised Eli. "Tha'lt have what's reet. Gi'e me the papers. I'll get a bit of ad-vice. When you want to get the rights and wrongs of a thing, you should go to t'fountain head."

He didn't go to the fountain head ; he went to the Red Lion which was a fountain of a sort. It was, at least, a great mart of experience.

"It's as easy as kiss your hand," he was told. "You say your lad tipped up all his brass on Friday neet and only had a shilling a week pocket money for hissen."

With the combined efforts of the bar, he filled in the form and, with a complete disregard for the penalties of forgery, wrote his wife's name beneath, which was duly witnessed in the same spirit by the publican.

A breezy young man on a noisy motor-bike called a few days later to investigate the claims. He thought she would get about seven shillings for each son, which was not much when they were paying half of it.

"I'm sorry, mother," sighed the official. "That's all I can do for you. You see, your lads weren't earning the money."

"If they'd stopped at home, like some others I know, they'd be addling good money in a month or two."

"That's true," he admitted. "But we're tied down to the wages they got before they joined up. You go along to the Committee and see what they can do."

Old Eli raised Cain when he came home.

"Two lads I've given to King and Country and all they're worth to us is seven shillings a week. Sithee, missis, tha'lt face the Committee and tell 'em a thing or two. If it were me I'd say—"

"Thee can go for me."

"Nay, lass. It's thy separation, non mine. I'd face 'em. Who are they, anyway? Old Ephraim Winder i'nt cheer. A teetotaller and non-smoker with a son who hides behind t'counter of his shop."

"If you'd talk t'committee half as big as you talk on your own hearthrug—"

"I would an' all. Only things must be done in a proper form. And you're the applicant and so I conna appear. It's a pity t'lads didn't put down my name. Then I could have showed 'em."

So Mother Hubbard put on her best and went to the schoolroom to face the Committee. Several other matrons were there, intent on their rights. They stiffened with respectability when a rather flashy young woman joined them. The silence was oppressive with the things they were holding back. The door to the inner sanctum opened discreetly.

"Mrs.—Miss Jones," said the clerk.

The flashy young woman threw him a mechanical smile and bounced through the door.

"Anybody can see what *she* is," declared one matron, nearly purple in the face from holding it in.

"Unmarried wife," sniffed another. "Everybody knows she's a tart."

"I've a good mind to go home. Things have come to a nice pass when we have to face the Committee with common tarts."

"She'll get twelve-and-six, same as a wife. *We* shan't get twelve-and-six for bringing a son into the world."

And so it went on, until the flashy young woman came out and disappeared without a word. By this time they were all worked up.

"Mrs. Hubbard," said the clerk.

"Here's a chair, Mrs. Hubbard," said old Ephraim

Winder. She sat down truculently and looked round the long table. All of them men, of course.

The clerk read the Pension Officer's report. 'The Applicant'—'the soldier' he kept saying. She did not realise it at first that this was her case, and that the Applicant meant Mother Hubbard, and the Soldier meant Moses. It was too soft to laugh at. The clerk stopped his droning and she became aware they were all looking at her. The chairman drummed the table with his finger-tips.

"Have you anything to say, Mrs. Hubbard?"

Had she anything to say! She said a little of it, hesitatingly at first and then warming up. When she paused for breath, the chairman interrupted her.

"Mrs. Hubbard," he said suavely, "we're in a difficulty. We know your lad was a good lad and would have given you more if he'd addled it. But we're tied down to the figures the Pit says he addled before he joined up. And on those figures the Pension Officer's recommendation seems fair. We're sorry."

And Mrs. Hubbard found herself in the cool night air, with only a fraction of her message delivered.

"Men!" she snorted contemptuously.

Life went on in spite of the War. Mother Hubbard's hands were full and she had little time to worry about Enoch and Moses. They were in danger, but they were in danger in the Pit. Their letters were brief but cheerful, and when they came home on leave during training, she rejoiced in their strength and in their appetites.

Then wages began to go up, chasing prices, but never quite overtaking them. Yet the pit, for the first time in her memory was working full time, and Eli, who liked to 'play' every now and then, never missed a shift. John was now 'filling,' and his wage helped to swell the family budget. Mother Hubbard had enough to feed her family, but it took a bit of doing. Prices seemed to leap up in the night. And the butcher wasn't so friendly. He didn't whisper confidentially "You try a slice of this undercut, mother. A bit I was saving for mysen." No, it was take it

or leave it now. And rabbits! A rabbit you could get for one-and-three (or less than that if your old man knew about traps and things) you had to beg on your bended knees.

Uncle Alfred was still in civil life. He turned up one Sunday with a long, shiny case. When he had whetted their curiosity long enough, he opened it and brought out a brass trombone.

"Lis's'n," he said impressively raising it to his lips. His cheeks distended, he blew a mighty gust and produced a series of depressing grunts.

"What do you think of that?"

"It 'ud be a sight better," declared Old Eli, "if you joined the Army instead of making them belly-aching noises."

"All in good time. Rome wasn't built in a day. And I dessay John Philip Souza made disgusting noises the first time he ever played a wind instrument. And look what he became."

"You want to learn a piece," advised Mother Hubbard. "*Lead kindly Light.*"

"A good march is what I like," went on Uncle Alfred, "Oom-pah, oom-pah, oom-pah, oom-pah, Tar-rah-rah—That's the rough idea."

"Lemme try," urged John.

Uncle Alfred shook out the spittle.

"You shall, my boy. And if you'll take a word of advice from a man nearly old enough to be your father, you'll buy a wind instrument of your own."

John blew until his eyes stood out like hat-pegs.

"Nay lad, it's a knack. It'll come to you. And then when your time comes to serve your King and Country, you'll be able to join the regimental band."

John came up for air.

"I'm going to feight," he said.

"You're in your hot blood. Almost every lad can fight, but there's not one in a thousand who can play a straight trombone. The Army takes care of a fellow who can play a wind instrument. The officers' Mess likes a

bit of music with its vittles. And they must have a band to play the troops off at the station. Yes," he sighed, "they all go to the station, but it's only the band that marches back to the barracks."

"So that's thy little game," growled Eli.

Uncle Alfred winked back at him.

Dave was now in the Cadet Corps at the Secondary School, and Mother Hubbard's heart ached every time she saw him in his miniature uniform. Abby drew soldiers. Endless lines of marching figures with aeroplanes overhead and guns belching smoke. At school, where every pretence of serious study had been given up, Abby was allowed to paint a series of historical studies round the cream walls of the class-room. Perched upon a step-ladder, painting the smooth surface, he was divinely happy. He was the only Hubbard left at the British School now; in fact he was *the* Hubbard. He hugged this little distinction to his breast. It is a bit humiliating to be the last of a long family.

The War was not so remote from Northedge. One night when they were sitting in their kitchen the mournful wail of the colliery siren warned them of a Zeppelin raid. The boys rushed out of doors, and stared skywards, looking for the cigar-shaped raider but they saw nothing. Mother fetched them in and they sat, holding their breath, and listening for the drone of engines. It was a still, silent evening. Suddenly the windows shivered. Five little shivers in quick succession.

"Explosion," decided Eli, "miles away, 'appen,"

A week later they heard that bombs had dropped in Sheffield.

The Hall was now a military hospital, and men in ill-fitting hospital blue sat under the trees and watched what cricket there was. Food was rationed, and the long queues in front of the butter shop had melted away. When a new baby was born in the Rows, there was a rush to get a birth certificate and a ration card, for until the baby developed a sweet tooth and insisted on its rights, there was a bit of extra sugar for the family.

Moses and Enoch came over for their last leave before going overseas. They were still both together in the Sherwoods among their own folk. They had filled out and the kitchen seemed packed to suffocation when they were all at home. Somehow these great lads made her and Eli seem shrunken and old. Well, she had to admit, the Army hadn't hurt them yet. They treated Abby to gob-stoppers, taught John the noble art of self-defence (he knew how to fight, of course), laughed at Dave in his cadet uniform, and lifted Mother up in the air to show their strength.

"Put me down!" she gasped. "The imperance."

But she loved it. Then Enoch held her forcibly in the arm-chair while Moses washed up.

"You've got to be a lady for once," they said.

They still went out at nights. The Monkey Parade, old spoil-sports called it. But this time they didn't balance themselves gingerly on the edge of the kerb, and whistle after saucy skirts. They walked with a swagger, and the girls hovered round them like wasps round a jam pot. Some of them were asking for trouble, and there was only one kind of trouble in Mother Hubbard's mind.

She lay awake at night listening for their footsteps on the stairs. Sometimes they came early, thumping noisily; at other times they creaked guiltily in stockinged feet. Well, they were grown men, and if they prowled like tom cats, she couldn't help it. She tried not to think of them out on the moors. Many years had passed since she and Eli had couched in the heather, but the memory still brought a little shiver of fear and ecstasy. Like father, like sons. But they had been good lads when they were at home.

The day came when they had to go. Mother Hubbard washed as usual. Nothing must disturb that rite. Besides, it gave her something to do. Bending over the tub, her ears picked up every familiar noise as her boys cleaned themselves up. Dave and Abby had loaded themselves with their kit which they insisted on carrying to the bus. Eli, who had missed a shift to see the boys off, was fussing

round uneasily. He looked a little more bleached than usual.

"Good-bye, Mam!" they sang out cheerily. Too cheerily. They kissed her awkwardly on the cheek. She looked up at them with misted eyes. Her lips moved, but no sound came.

"We'll be all right," they said.

Old Eli shook them by the hand.

"Don't do anything, lads, to make thy mother fret."

His voice gave out, and he turned abruptly away.

"You'll miss your bus," said Mother Hubbard, finding her voice.

They clattered out, and the house was empty and dead. Mother Hubbard bent her head over the wash-tub. Her back heaved as she sobbed silently. Old Eli shambled by. He couldn't stand the tomb of a house any longer. As he passed, he patted her gently on her shoulder.

CHAPTER VIII

1917. NORTHEDGE was in the War up to the neck. The young men were combed out of the pit and their places were taken by men who had, they thought, escaped from the Pit for ever. Foxy men who had learned how to run a 'book,' paunchy men who had kept a pub, professional footballers, men who had dreamed of a little place in the country where they could keep a few fowls. They were all back, and the Pit was none the safer for their return. And the veterans who had earned their seat in the chimney corner still worked shift for shift with men in the pride of their strength.

Windows were blackened at night against the new terror that sailed the skies. The few buses that bumped over the pot-holes of the neglected roads, were as old and asthmatic as the men who worked the pits. Trains were fewer and packed to suffocation, for everybody had to travel. The new munition factory sucked its workers from a wide

countryside, soldiers were coming on leave, or going back to the trenches, and there was a constant pilgrimage of weary-eyed women to visit their sons and husbands in hospital. No new thing for Northedge. Every woman knew visiting day, for the pit claims its victims all the year round. Little accidents too small for a line in the London papers—a fall of roof, a cage crash—but large enough to wreck a family's happiness.

Mother Hubbard saw her sons die before her eyes every night. It was a relief when she heard that Moses was wounded. Humble folks asked little of life in 1917, and a wound was a slice of luck. Wounded and back in England. At the Great Northern Hospital, Sheffield. Why, it was nearly on the doorstep. She began to get ready at once, for she must go decent. Then she couldn't go empty-handed. Flowers? Moses was never one for flowers. Food was more in his line, and hospital food wouldn't suit him. Mother Hubbard had a poor idea of Hospital food. Slops, bread and butter, and rice pudding. Always the same, day after day, until the stomach turned. She packed him a few cakes, hot from the oven. And there was a nice slab of cold Yorkshire pudding left over from Sunday. She'd slip that into his cupboard when nurse wasn't looking. Yes, and a few stamps and envelopes she must get from Baxter's so that he could write every day. Now, was there anything else he would like? She remembered the dog's-eared little book he carried about with him, and ran it to earth in the pocket of his best coat. "One Thousand side-splitting Jests," she read, on the greasy cover. She put it on top of her parcel. It might take his mind off his wound.

Eli went with her. He didn't want to go.

"I'm none so fond of hospitals," he grumbled. "Wimmin-ridden places. Draughty holes."

"That's enough," said Mother Hubbard tartly. "You're coming with me."

So he missed a shift, tied his best scarf into a knot, stuck his cap rakishly on his head, thrust his hands into his pockets, and went with her. It was the first time he had

walked down High Street with her for years. They journeyed by bus to Chesterfield, and there they caught a train for Sheffield. Others on the same errand shared their compartment, and the journey passed happily in grisly reminiscence.

"Eh," sighed a woman in the corner, "I s'll be glad to get back."

"Aren't you going to the Hospital?"

"Nay, I live in Sheffield. I've just been to Derby to identify Uncle Herbert. Drowned in the canal, he was."

"Must have been a shock for you. Did you go t' mortuary?"

"Aye, I did that. I thought it would be awful, seeing all them corpses. But they were all screened off, and there was Uncle Herbert by hisself in a glass case. He looked beautiful."

And so on, until Mother Hubbard began to lose her nerve.

"Now, Ma," said a man in dungarees, "don't you worry. Doctors can do anything. If they take an interest in a case, that is. If you got an 'acking cough, they won't look at you. But if you got complications, they get proper interested——"

"They experiment on you, you mean," sneered a stout fellow in the corner. "They don't practise on their posh patients, but if they want to show their pupils how to amputate, they go round the hospital and before you can say 'knife,' you've lost a leg."

From the gloom of the Sheffield Station they emerged into the thin sunlight of the city. They boarded a tram, and after many enquiries of the conductor, they were set down at the hospital gates. No need to ask directions further. There was a steady pilgrimage of mothers and wives carrying parcels, flowers, or children.

The smell of iodine, a vast hall, miles of corridors, stretchers on rubber-tyred wheels, fleeting glimpses of wards with rows of beds, white faces all looking one way, waiting for the sight of a familiar face.

Eli didn't see him at first. All the faces seemed the same.

"He's non here, Mam," he said.

But Mother Hubbard was walking briskly down the ward. Eli skidded on the slippery surface after her.

"Eh dear," she sighed, looking at her lad.

He had dark rings under his eyes and his cheeks were sunken. He was older, graver.

"What have they done to thee, Moses?" she whispered.

"I'm all right, Mam," he lied.

"Of course. That's why they've brought thee here."

"Shot through the chest," he explained. "The doc. says it's going on all right."

"Thank God," she sighed, "I thowt—I hardly know what I thought. Now, Eli, sit you down and look less on legs. And now look what I've brought thee, lad."

Then the time went swiftly with news of the family and the births, marriages, and deaths of Northedge.

"Now, Eli," Mother Hubbard said briskly, "There's sister motioning us to go. Have you got nowt to say to your lad?"

"Don't know as I have. But I'm right glad to see him back. Did you kill many Jerries, lad?"

"Nivver seen one," grinned Moses. "Mam, afore you go—"

"Yes, my lad?" She bent her head to listen.

"Say a word to this chap in t'next bed. He's had nobody to see him to-day."

Then they were hustled out, and the ward was at peace again. The wounded, according to their temperaments, sank back into their apathy, their secret dreams, or into the life of the hospital. The eagerly awaited moment had come and gone. Mothers, sisters and sweethearts had seemed a little different. Not as they'd been imagined in the long hours in trench and billets. Not quite real. Babbling cheerfully of trifles concerning a life that was dead. Prices of stockings, a new minister at the Prims, a bankruptcy, a wedding or two, which all meant nothing. And they were so damned cheerful about it, as if they had to be cheerful. Or else they wept as if their men were dead and buried already. No, the wounded didn't belong to this

everyday world of chatter and gossip. They didn't belong. They never would belong again.

And the visitors sighed as they reached the gates as if to say, "Well, that's over." It had been awkward for them too. Racking their brains to think of something to interest the lad. Disconcerted by the change in him, by his weary, cynical look. Poor lad. Mark my words, he's seen things, terrible things. It's marked him. Eh, I could do with a cup of tea.

"We didn't ought to have come here," whispered Mother Hubbard. "It's too fine. Ta'e thy cap off."

Eli regarded the plate of small fancy cakes with dismay.

"All clout and no pudd'n," he decided.

"I expect it's one of them afternoon teas," explained Mother Hubbard. "Not a proper tea."

"I've heard tell of 'em," admitted Eli. "Look at them cups. Like thimbles. They're careful wi' their sugar, aren't they?"

"It's raytioned. But you can ha'e mine. I just wanted one cup. Nay, I've got better cakes in the pantry at home."

Eli helped himself again.

"Might as well eat 'em. We shall ha'e to pay for 'em. Got to keep going till I can stretch my legs under my own table."

"Twelve cakes?" asked the waitress, superciliously as she made out the bill. What a common lot of people were here to-day. Not a tip among them. "Thank you. Pay at the desk, please," and she flounced off.

"Saucy madam," muttered Eli, watching the swing of her skirt with an appraising eye.

"You' oughtn't to have ate all them cakes," said Mother Hubbard when she had gained the social security of the pavement. "They count 'em up and only charge you for what you eat."

"How was I to know?" grumbled Eli.

"We'll find a quiet place next time," she decided, "where they do a nice ham tea."

But she knew that wild horses would not drag Eli to the

hospital again. Not unless— But she mustn't think of that. Moses was on the mend. She didn't care how long it took to mend him. While he was there he was safe.

Mother Hubbard trailed to the hospital alone after that. Once a week, regular as clockwork, she boarded the same bus and the same train, clutching a parcel of goodies which she never let go. The conductress of the bus (yes, they had girls everywhere now) and the guard of the train knew her. The booking-clerk slapped down her ticket before she could open her mouth. They all called her "Ma," and they asked after her lad's progress with the easy kindness of the North. Once she took Abby, because he could go for half fare, and he was terribly proud to look after his mother on the perilous journey. All journeys were perilous to Abby just then. Sinister pick-pockets and murderers padded silently down the side streets. Every bush and tree concealed a Red Indian on the trail. The railway coach was packed with German spies. Yet, by constant vigilance, he, Absalom Hubbard, brought the Great White Chief to safety. But he didn't like the hospital. All those faces staring at him, and the sharp smell of iodine scared him. He wouldn't go again.

So Mother went alone—a little grimmer, a little more weary each time, but filled with content because Moses was on the mend. If she could only get him home—

Then Hilda joined the household. Hilda was a cousin, Abby was told. Her father was fighting in France and her mother had to go to hospital for an operation. Somebody had to look after the child, and "somebody" was Mother Hubbard. There is always room for one more in the homes of the poor, and, while Mother Hubbard was proud of her line of sons, she would have loved just one daughter.

Abby adored her because she could climb trees like a boy, and thought his pictures were wonderful, especially if they were drawings of her. Though she slapped his face if he painted her hair in red. In vain he protested that it was red to him and he had to put down what he saw. In vain he argued that it was a lovely shade, more

beautiful and much rarer than golden locks. He just had to mess it up, trying to get a shade she called auburn.

She was going to be a dancer.

"At theaters?" whispered Abby, who had been taught they were wicked.

"On the Halls," she corrected. "I'm going to be Top of the Bill. *Hilda de Vaughan* I'm going to call myself."

"Swank," said Abby.

"You gotta swank when you get on the Halls. *Speciality Tap Dancer*."

"Can you dance?" asked Abby doubtfully.

"You watch me," said Hilda.

She wriggled out of her skirt and stood before him in a pair of patched drawers.

"I shall wear tights in my act, but this is the best I can do now."

And she began to tap out a measure very effectively, worked up to a fine frenzy, kicked one foot high in the air, and bowed to a delirious audience. Then she came back before a phantom curtain, threw a kiss to the gallery, and waggled her little bottom as she went off.

"I say," gasped Abby, "you wouldn't do that in public, would you?"

"Don't be silly," she scoffed. "That's how it's always done."

And she climbed back into her skirt.

She was a great success with Moses when she was taken to the Sheffield Hospital.

"What are you going to be," he asked to make conversation, "when you grow up?"

"A Speciality Tap Dancer," she answered promptly, "on the Halls."

"Sich nonsense," snorted Mother Hubbard.

"Let the kid alone, Ma," said Moses.

After that, Mother Hubbard could barely get a word in. Hilda had seen all the stars and knew a bit of back-stage jargon. Moses confided that he played the bones and was trying to think up a bit of patter to make an act. She promised to bring his bones on her next visit, and she even

danced a step or two on the polished hospital floor to Ma Hubbard's great scandal.

"The sauce!" she whispered. "What will the sister say? Wait till I get you home, you madam."

But Moses smiled secretly at her. Henceforth they were in league together. Both of them were thinking tentatively of a double act. That is, if the other partner was any good.

One day, Mother Hubbard journeyed alone to the hospital. She found a stranger seated by her son's bed, a pert girl with corn-coloured hair.

"This is Aggie," Moses explained in an off-hand way, meaning, "This is my girl. Mind you treat her right."

Mother Hubbard ran her eyes over her and her heart sank.

"Pleased to meet you," she said. "And how are you feeling now, my boy?"

The besom, her mind ran on. My son's wife. She'd never say that now, not with pride. My God, what men-folk she had. Couldn't he see she was no good? She was fair ashamed to talk to Moses about his food and washing before that piece.

"Oh, well," drawled Aggie, getting up, "if you've nothing to say to me, I'd better go. You'd better tell her while she's here. She's got to know."

"It's like this," said Moses, "me and Aggie are getting wed."

Mother Hubbard looked sharply at the girl.

"Does that mean you've got to get wed?"

"Two months gone," said the girl casually. "I'm not the first to get caught up on t'moors. And I shan't be t'last."

"A bit of a risk, lass," said the mother. "S'pose Moses had—had died afore he could make an honest woman of you?"

"That's enough," growled Moses. "You've gotter be friends. You mustn't mind Mam, Aggie. It's come as a bit of a surprise to her. And you'll get to like Aggie, Mam. She's a Northedge lass. Tom Slater's eldest. You know Tom Slater."

"One of them Slaters up at Top End?"

“Top End’s as good as Long Row any day,” she flared. “If you’d got a spark of spunk,” she flung at Moses, “you’d stand up for me. If I’m good enough to go to bed with, I’m good enough to sit at your Ma’s table.”

And she flounced off, her high heels beating a tattoo on the polished floor.

“Oh, Moses,” groaned Mother Hubbard. “What made you do it?”

“It was my last leaf,” he said simply.

“I know.”

“All the same, you’d better be reight wi’ her.”

“I’ll be reight, lad. God knows I’ll be that.”

But her heart was heavy. She tried to tell herself that this had to come to all women when their sons grew up. But she knew it was more than the jealousy which any woman felt when another claimed flesh of her flesh as her own. To a decent God-fearing girl, she would have given Moses gladly. Eh, well, he’d made his bed, and he’d have to lie on it.

Enoch was now in the thick of the fight in France. Occasionally a field card or a pencil scrawl came to Mother Hubbard to assure her he was all right. He was a lance-corporal now. He said nothing about the future, but rumours of a big push got about. Guns, guns and still more guns rumbled through the night on their way to the South-coast ports. More men were combed from the pit. Casualty lists grew longer and longer. The telegraph boy was watched from door to door. Would he ride past? Yes, this time, at least. Relief, and then a sense of pity for that other woman whose trembling fingers would have to tear open that envelope.

“Any answer?”

No. There was never any answer. Just dumb agony. There could be no answer.

Mother Hubbard dreaded her shopping excursions along King Street and up to Main Street. Short though the journey she would meet women she knew dressed in unaccustomed rusty black. Somebody she must comfort. And what comfort could she give?

And yet she must shop, for food was short and butchers had to be watched. Ration cards were all very well. You got your proper weight, but if you didn't see it cut, you got more than your share of bone and gristle. Her two men at the pit had to put meat into them. They couldn't hew coal and fill tubs on bread. Even the bread was 'war bread' now. "Bird seed," Eli called it. Bird seed and marge was no food for miners. So she watched Mr. Meacham like a lynx while he chopped her bit of a joint, made him wait until the scale had come to rest, and then eked out the precious cut with some dubious sausages.

"It's not *my* fault, Ma," explained Mr. Meacham. "If I'd got it you should have it and welcome."

"Some folks get it," muttered Mother Hubbard.

"Not from me," declared the butcher. "Some men in the trade—I name no names—"

"I know," nodded Mother Hubbard.

"There's something going on," whispered Mr. Meacham confidentially, "and I'm going to get to the bottom of it."

And he stuck his chopper in the block as if he were sticking it into his trade rivals.

Then a new butcher's shop was opened in Ken Row by a stranger. Bright red meat it was surrounded by a dark yellow fat. Horse flesh. A few women slipped in after dark for a slice "as an experiment like," and foisted it to unsuspecting husbands. But they didn't come back for more, and the shop soon had to close.

But Mr. Meacham's supplies improved. He could put in a bit extra for good customers like Mrs. Hubbard.

"You see," he explained confidentially, "I've got my hand on t'ship."

"Thee and thy ships," snorted Mother Hubbard. "Killing on t'sly, you mean."

"Nay. It was like this, Ma. I went round to see old Tom Winch one neet last week. Tuesday, it was. And I didn't knock at front door. No, I went quietly round the back and I saw a light in t'slaughter house. So up I creeps, sees what I sees, and taps on the window. Old

Tom nearly throws a fit, because he was just carving up a nice young calf that the Food Office knew nowt about.

"He opens t'door.

" 'Oh, it's you,' he whispers.

" 'Aye,' I said, daft like. 'I thought I'd look in as I was passing. That's a nice calf you've got there.' The sweat was standing on him.

" 'Tom Meacham,' he said, 'I used to know your feyther. He wor a sportsman, he wor. And I expect you're a sportsman, too. I shouldn't like the Food Officer to know about this calf.'

" 'You'd be in a proper mess and all if he got to know,' I said.

" 'He'll non know,' he said, 'if you don't tell him. I'll mak' it worth your while to keep your mouth shut.'

" 'Nay,' I said, 'I want nowt. Only I wondered why you got meat and I only got offal. I just wondered, that's all. Good-neet.'

" But he wouldna let me go.

" 'Name a figger,' he said, 'and it's yours.'

" 'I want no figger,' I said. 'I just want my hand on t'ship.'

" And that's every word that passed between us. But whenever there's a bit of private slaughtering done, I get my little bit. And while there's a bit for me there's a bit for good steady customers. But mum's the word."

Beer was short, too, and that was a grievance to men who breathed coal dust all day. But the foundrymen and puddlers missed it most of all. Straight from the shift they went to the Green Dragon, which was their special house, and there on the metalled bar stood dozens of quart mugs filled to the brim with strong ale. In silence, each of the 'regulars' picked up his mug, tossed his head back, and with a sigh, banged the empty mug on the counter. Tossing molten iron about is thirsty work. Only after the second quart were their throats moist enough for talk.

Everybody had an allotment at that time. The Company ploughed up the land, let it at a nominal sum, bought seed, offered prizes. They tried to do something with the

gardens of the Company's houses which had long been patches of waste land, given over to cats and dogs and nettles. But miners are not gardeners. Even a shortage of food could not goad more than a fraction of their number into regular toil on the land. They would sit on their haunches in the sunshine, they would cluster in dilapidated wooden huts and gamble, but they would not weed. Eli soon let John run the allotment. He gardened for his mother's sake, not from any love of the soil. He gardened furiously, and in a bad temper, wrestling with the soil as a miner wrestles with coal. He wanted more time with his books. There were so many things he wanted to learn. Things about poverty, opportunity, why the world was divided into 'haves' and 'have-nots.' He wanted to know all about shop stewards in Glasgow, and the Revolution in Russia.

Yes, 1917, with its Peace Ship, its open diplomacy at Brest-Litovsk, its Stockholm Conference, its Bolshevist Revolution, its Lansdowne letter, its rumours of French mutinies, was slightly hysterical. Northedge didn't take any account of such rumours. This was a fight, and a fight was fought to a finish. When miners stripped off their shirts, they fought till they couldn't stand.

So the year went on to a close. Work, sleep, the wail of the syren, dimmed lamps, and the anxious wait for the postman's knock. Moses was hobbling about now in hospital blue. Please God he didn't recover too soon. And Enoch, caked in grey mud, came back from the shambles of Passchendaele, bitter beyond his years. Mother Hubbard fed him as he had liked to be fed even though she would have to skimp for the weeks that followed, and she made him up the softest bed in the house.

It nearly broke her heart when she found him next morning rolled in his blanket on the hard floor.

CHAPTER IX

MOSES was discharged from hospital and came home on leave. The banns had been called, and he was married at the Parish Church on the hillside one October afternoon when the bracken was red. And because there were no cottages to be had, he went to live with her folk. Mother Hubbard shook her head over this arrangement.

"It'll come to no good," she declared. "You want a home of your own."

Moses came down to No. 42, Long Row, almost every day and sat in the armchair while his mother baked and cleaned. He said very little, but dreamed in his sleepy fashion, and Mother Hubbard was well content to have him there. But he brightened up when Hilda was at home, and on her encouragement, he began to practise his singing again and brought home a copy of "Asleep in the Deep" and "Archibald, certainly not" (as sung by George Robey). Then Hilda danced to the clickety-clack of his bones until Mother Hubbard protested against the waste of so much good shoe-leather. And after school Abby would rush in, and when he had been suitably coaxed, showed them his model theatre with the scenery he was painting for Hilda's Act.

"You'll come to a bad end, all of you," grumbled Mother Hubbard indulgently.

Moses had no place he could call his own in Aggie's house, and when Mother Hubbard, in her turn, shoo'd him off, as she did when she was scrubbing the tiles, he wandered off to explore the district. And while he was poking round Ilson, which was a larger and more pretentious edition of Northedge, he ran across Horace.

Horace wore spats, and wore them with an air, but they did not blend with his creaseless trousers which looked as if he had slept in them. He wore a Homburg hat a size too small on a head a size too large. He was sailing along, his spats twinkling, holding his silver-knobbed cane in front of him like a crozier. Around him eddied a dozen

ragamuffins who wanted to know the whereabouts of his hatter.

"Run along home and be mother's good boys," he pleaded. He took off his hat and mopped his brow.

"There's 'air!" squealed his entourage. "Who robbed the barber?"

They were barging up against him now, and taunting him with the cruelty of small boys. Moses first grinned at the scene and then saw the little man's genuine distress.

"Eh!" he barked. "Buzz off."

The boys looked at this big fellow in his corporal's uniform, sized him up, and slunk away into a side street as if they were going that way in any case.

"Boys," explained the stranger. "You know how they are. Will you accept a spot of refreshment at my hands, sir?"

"Don't mind if I do," assented Moses.

They pushed open the big doors of the Blue Dragon.

"Two bo'l Guinness, my love," requested Horace of the proud and bouncing lady behind the bar. He swept up his change with a flourish, and handed Moses a glass with a gesture an Emperor might have envied.

"Mozeltoff!" he pronounced.

"Eh?" muttered Moses.

"A toast," he explained, "a favourite with us who tread the boards. Have you ever trodden the Thespian boards, madam?"

"None of your lip, my lad," replied the lady who presided over the beer pump.

"Phyllis misunderstands," he deprecated. "Obviously she has not trodden the boards though admirably equipped by mother nature for that exercise. What ample curves, what voluptuous swellings—"

"Any more of your sauce," hissed the lady, "and out you go."

"Stand not upon the order of your going, but go at once," Shakespeare. How much more nobly the Swan of Avon puts it. Not 'any more of your sauce.' That, sweet chuck, lacks dignity."

"Sweet chuck!" breathed the barmaid ferociously.

"The words are not mine," explained Horace, "but those of Sweet Will of Old Drury, our Great Shakespeare. The Bird, I mean the Bard of Avon."

"Let him come in here and say it, that's all."

"Have another?" suggested Moses.

Horace looked with surprise at his empty glass.

"Can a fish swim?" he asked.

Two more glasses were slammed down on the sodden counter. Moses produced a crumpled packet of wood-bines.

"Avaunt," commanded Horace. "Phyllis, love, a couple of cigars. Real Havanas."

"Eightpence or sixpence?" she clicked.

"Fourpence, my love. I regret to say," he lamented, "that the sixpenny brand is beyond my immediate resources."

Moses put down his last shilling on the counter.

"The spirit of the profession, my lad," Horace said approvingly. "Am I right in assuming, sir, that in civil life, before your King and Country called you, the boards were not unknown to you?"

"No," sighed Moses, "I'm not a nactor."

"You surprise me. As soon as I set eyes on you I said to myself 'Henry Irving's come again.' Some men are born actors, just as some men are born liars. No need to get boiled head over it. It's just Providence. Now you're a born actor. Don't tell me, I know. I can tell by the way you order Guinness. The ordinary man offers a drink. The actor distributes *largesse*. I can tell by the way you smoke a cigar. Some people eat 'em. The actor speaks volumes with his. Pardon me, you've let it go out. The means of ignition are here."

"Thanks," grunted Moses. "It's funny you should say that. I play the bones, you know."

"Not the dear old corner man of the Christy Minstrels?"

"Aye. But I jazz it. Like to hear Alexander's Rag-Time Band?"

And Moses fingered his bones lovingly. They were his

constant companions. Horace tapped a *pas seul* to the staccato rhythms.

"A gift," he decided when the performance was over, "but not enough. It's too austere by itself. The public wants colour, legs and laughter."

"I gotta work up an act. I know that. I got a kid sister—well, she's a cousin really, only we've adopted her—and she step-dances a treat. Only she's too young yet."

Horace weighed him up.

"Can you sing?"

"I'm in a choir," explained Moses. "'Andel and all that."

"You've got a deep voice. I tell you what. I've got a proposition. I wouldn't reveal it to anyone else in the world, but I trust you. I," he uttered confidentially, "have seen better days. I was once the darling of the Rotunda. Me and Little Tich used to fill that place, and Marie Lloyd would break her contract if I wasn't in the same bill. But that's all over. One man turns are bust. Let's join forces. Let's woo the fickle jade Success in company. You pardner me. See? Moses and Horace, comedy duo. No, that's too much of a mouthful. The two. Something or other. I know. Got it. The Two Mozelt-offs."

"But what shall we do?" asked Moses.

"I got the goods all right. You help me deliver 'em. Come to my digs and practise."

Feeling like lords, they left the Tap Room, dodged down a cobbled side street, and entered a tall house which had an air of faded grandeur.

"Phyllis, love," Horace called up the stairs. "Rchearsal. Come and tinkle the ivories."

A solemn girl in spectacles answered the summons, dumped her body on the piano stool, and crashed out a chorus.

"Not that, my love," interrupted Horace. "Got something new."

He picked out a faded scrap of manuscript from his breast pocket.

“One-line copy, Phyllis. Band parts can be put in later when we see how it goes. You’ll first have to vamp a bass. My part’s A yours is B,” he indicated to Moses. “We start in unison. We can harmonise it later. Can you manage it, Phyllis?”

Phyllis tossed her pig-tail.

“Can you?” she retorted.

This is how it ran :

Both. Two fascinating gentlemen are we,
I hope that on that point you will agree.
By one and all admired,
Our services are hired,
For qualit-ee as well as quantit-ee.

A. You recognise the tenor, I suppose?

B. You can tell him by the pimple on his nose.
I’m the rich, melodious bass—

A. You can tell him by his face.

B. And so, of course, he reckons that he knows.

Both. ’Tis true in some things we excel each other.

B. You have a voice that mine would rather smother.

A. You think so? Well, here’s proof!! (*fortissimo*).

B. Yes, I think that shook the roof.

So I playfully give way unto my brother.

Both. We never have occasion for a quarrel.
To adopt a different style is each one’s moral.

A. Yet I excel in grace.

B. No reference to his face.

With regard to handsome looks I take the laurel!

A (Patter).

Yes, you do take the lorry. You’d take anything
From a pin to a gasometer.

There was quite a lot more. They boomed and sweated
their way through it.

“I could do it better,” confessed Moses, “if I knew
what it was all about.”

“It’s a comedy number. Who cares what it’s about?
What do you think of it, Phyllis?”

“Tripe,” said the pianist, and meant it.

“The trouble with you, Phyllis, is you’re highbrow.

When you're older, you'll realise that people want a good laugh to take them out of themselves. Make 'em forget the rent's overdue and the price of beer's gone up, and grandmother's coming to stay. Don't take any notice of her, son. She's like all highbrows. Her Bach's worse than her bite."

"Ha! Ha!" said Phyllis bitterly.

"You want to realise how it will look on the boards. I shall wear my pill-box hat. You should be dressed as a dude. We shall walk about a bit. Goes much better if we walk about. Simultaneously, you know. Three steps to the right in unison. Wheel. Three steps to the left. We shall knock 'em, boy. Now, come along. Right foot forward. One, two, three. Swing your cane and mind the wax fruit. One, two, three. Come on, Phyllis. Let her rip."

"Two—fascinating gentlemen are we," they sang.

They rehearsed for an hour.

"Might make something of it," panted Moses. "If we get some better jokes."

"What's the matter with the gags?" demanded Horace, his eyes protruding in innocent surprise. "These gags always get a hand."

"Then they're not new?"

"Bless you, son, the public likes the jokes it knows."

"Whiskers on 'em," said Phyllis, getting up from the piano and yawning in an unladylike manner. "I'm off. Wasted enough time."

"Thank you, love," murmured Horace, opening the door with a courtly grace. Phyllis screwed up her nose in a swift grimace as she passed.

Moses copied out his part, and went home, walking on air. Back to a crowded kitchen, to the nattering of a shrewish mother-in-law, and a querulous wife always wanting to be taken to the pictures. He sat in a corner, impervious to the din, on his lips a secret smile. He was rehearsing to himself, "Two fascinating gentlemen are we."

Then he felt the need to share his news with someone

who would appreciate it. He must find Hilda. He got up and reached for his cap.

"Now where are you off to?" demanded Aggie.

"Out," he called over his shoulder.

Hilda was thrilled to the bone. You could always depend on Hilda. She didn't throw buckets of cold water on a chap's enthusiasms.

"Of course," she said wisely, "he's not a top-liner, or he wouldn't pick on you. Not because you're no good," she added hastily, "but because you've no experience."

"You ought to hear him talk. He knows Marie Lloyd and Little Tich. Everybody. Calls 'em by their Christian names."

"I expect he's a has-been," she decided. "A bit too strong i'th elbow. Keep him sober and learn something from him. If it's a flop, it don't matter if you've learned something. That's what I'm going to do. Can I tell Abby?"

"Aye. But tell him to shut his gob."

"I'll ma'e him spit his death. Abby isn't a tell-tale. I say, you'll let me and Abby come and see the Act when you put it on? Where will it be? The Empire at Nottingham?"

"Nay, lass. I mun walk before I con run. Horace did say summat about Joe Morland's place in Ilson."

"Why, that's only a pub."

"Well, it's a start."

"But we shan't be able to go to a pub. And I did so want to see your—what do you call it?—debbut. See if you can sneak me in."

And Moses rehearsed and practised his part up on the moors to the great bewilderment of grazing sheep until he was word-perfect. Then at Ilson, he worked with Horace and forced his stiff body into the easy nonchalance demanded by the stage, while Phyllis grew more and more contemptuous.

"Boy," declared Horace. "It'll be a riot."

Moses hoped against hope that the War would not claim him again.

The turn had its trial run at Joe Morland's Palace of Varieties, a long, low room over the Green Dragon. No bills advertised the show, but a blackboard which hung on the outside wall headed: "Licensed for Music and Dancing. This week's artistes" bore the legend:

THE TWO MOZELTOFFS
COMEDY DUO
AND
ECCENTRICS

Small boys had added libellous and imaginary portraits. Revealing portraits with no squeamish bits of Victorian gauze to conceal essential facts.

No cash was taken at the doors, the public being admitted on the tacit understanding that liquid refreshment must be paid for. There was also, Moses discovered, a similar understanding that the artistes should be paid a substantial part of their fees in this liquid currency, an arrangement that suited Horace. Without wounding his partner's self-esteem, he could secure his right to seventy-five per cent. of their joint salary.

"Feel all right, bo!?" asked Horace, in the stuffy little dressing-room. "Have a corpse-reviver? For myself, no. My art needs concentration, and I must postpone traffic with Bacchus until the curtain falls."

"There's no curtain," said Moses who had a literal mind.

"A figure of speech, bo'. A figure of speech."

"There's no band, neither. Only a pianner."

"Patience, my son. You must begin at the bottom rung. I began at the bottom, and yet what dizzy heights I touched! Did I ever tell you of the occasion when I appeared before Crowned Heads?"

"Many a time," snapped Moses who had lost his nerve.

"But you didn't stop on your dizzy heights."

"Mr. Morland's compliments," chanted a cheeky lad, thrusting his head into the room, "and you're to go on at once and keep 'em quiet."

"My compliments to Mr. Morland," returned Horace

gravely, lifting his pill-box hat, "and assure him that all will be well. Hop it."

Their entrance should have been greeted with at least a polite applause, but only a cat-call or two welcomed them. The room was full of smoke and noise, and the damp, rusty odour of human beings was overpowering. The audience was just a blurred mass to Moses, but his eye caught a prominently displayed notice :

*Ladies without hats are not served
in this room.*

He couldn't understand this, but remembered he must concentrate on his lines and pulled himself together.

"This the best you can do?" asked the fat pianist, nodding at the music. "One line copy? Some people have a nerve."

"To a musician of parts," responded Horace diplomatically, "it presents no difficulties."

"You want me to vamp?"

"Orchestrate, rather," suggested Horace.

"Well, I can't vamp in that blamed key, so that's that."

"Any old key," murmured Horace, "will do. We can sing it if you can play it. Have I ever told you how I appeared before—"

The rattle of the beer mugs became insistent. Crash went the chord from the piano.

"Two—fascinating gentlemen are we—" they sang lustily. They struggled through as far as the patter.

"Whad the 'ell are they doing?" demanded a drunken voice.

The patter was received in chill silence. Again they burst into song.

"Sing berrer mysen," shouted the drunk. "Gorra li'l lad at home sing berrer than that. Shurrup!"

A steady exodus to the adjoining Tap Room.

The song petered out, the pianist crashed a last chord, Horace bowed low to the front of the house, and grinned encouragingly to an imaginary gallery. A low sibilant sound, followed by more piercing whistles.

"My God! The Bird!" panted Horace, as they retreated to the dressing-room. "Shut the door!" he almost screamed. "Shut it out!"

But not before the crude indecency of another noise smote their ears.

"The Raspberry!" gasped Horace. "The Bird *and* the Raspberry."

And his pathetic little comedian's face puckered as if he were going to cry.

"Mr. Morland's compliments," said the pert boy, bringing in a tray and two mugs of ale, "and you're to sup up and hop it. Back door, and you're to shin over the wall. They're waiting for you out in the front. Some herbs, aren't you?"

And he disappeared.

"Drink mine," said Moses curtly. "I'm off."

The partnership was dissolved.

When Moses' house of cards toppled, he spent still more time at home. Only to Hilda he related the story.

"He was a ham-bone," she consoled. "That stuff was awful."

"You didn't say so."

"Nay, lad, you were up in t'clouds. I daren't bring you down."

"I'm down all right now."

"Bosh," she declared. "You canna be betten unless you bet yoursen. Why don't you sing straight songs? You gotta voice. You don't need to do a song and dance Act. You could wear evening dress and gloves and be a class turn."

And bit by bit she flattered him back to self-respect though she hoped God would forgive her for telling such lies.

Mother Hubbard liked to see him in her chimney corner, but it wasn't right and she told him so. A married man's place was in his own home.

"She's with her mother, I'm with mine," asserted Moses. "What's wrong wi' that?"

"You want a place of your own. There's a cottage at Moorside—"

"A pigsty."

"It'll clean."

"Aye, and Thomas Henry wants two pounds for the key. That's a chapel man for you. You'd think a man who was laying up treasure in Heaven wouldn't bother to grind a couple of pounds out of the faces of the poor."

"Sit thee here and keep an eye on the 'taters. I'll go and get that key. You men are that shiftless—"

She threw a shawl over her head and padded off. Moses smiled a superior masculine smile. She wouldn't get anything out of Thomas Henry.

But in half an hour she was back again with a massive piece of ironmongery dangling in triumph from her forefinger.

"Mam!" exclaimed Moses in admiration. "How did you do it?"

"Offered him two pound," she said beaming, "only he wouldna take it."

"John Henry wouldn't take two pounds?"

"Nay. He wouldn't charge two pounds to a man who'd bled for his country."

"Fat lot he cares for his country. But what made him say that?"

"That I couldna tell," said Mother Hubbard. "All I said was that I'd put two pounds in the plate at Ebenezer on Sunday, and when the collection was finished I would rise up and testify what I'd gi'en it for. He said he didn't like bringing church into business and he wouldn't dream of asking a penny from a soldier."

"Mam, you're a wonder," and he gave her a smacking kiss.

"Be off with you, and have a good look at it. And if I was you, lad, I'd give it a lick of paint afore you show it to Aggie. She might take a dislike to it."

So Moses worked off his energies in preparing his new home, and in a week's time he and his bride moved in. She didn't like it. It was too small, old-fashioned, and it

was so lonesome it gave her the creeps, but she soon settled down, and with Moses working in the garden or in the shed, she seemed quite content. Moses was tender to her in his clumsy way and would barely let her do a hand's turn. She must be careful of Tim. Their child was to be called Timothy. A boy, of course.

One day she returned from a visit to her mother, with the sulky expression on her mouth that presaged a storm.

"Well, how are you both?" he said cheerily.

"Don't be so soft," she sneered.

"Can't I ask a civil question about my son's health?"

She looked at him as if she would like to hurt him. Then she struck.

"False alarm," she said quietly.

It hurt right enough. It made him wince, anyway.

"What do you mean—false alarm?" he repeated stupidly. "You said you were two months gone."

"Did I?"

She yawned in his face.

"I wanted you. I was a bloody fool, but I did."

"Then you—you trapped me?"

He remembered the magic night in the heather with the moon riding the sky, and the sharp sweet scent of hay drifting up from the valley. He remembered the pounding of his heart and his clumsy hands exploring the soft curves of her body. And that passive giver was trapping him!

He couldn't trust himself to speak. Hammers beat inside his head. He was going mad. He must get out. He started to prowl the moor, but it was too full of memories. He needed lights, laughter and liquor. He reeled home just before midnight and thrashed his wife.

In the morning the postman brought a summons to present himself at the Normanton Barracks for medical examination. He was passed fit for service again and was at once drafted to the front. Nearly every man of his company was a complete stranger to him. The officers were strangers. The regiment, they told him, had been through Hell. He didn't care how soon it went through Hell again.

CHAPTER X

THE Spanish Influenza passed like a destroying angel over Northedge, striking down the old and the young, the feeble and the hale with its impartial sword. There was no house without its sickness, and few without its dead. Whole families were prostrate at the same time, and only lived because kindly neighbours broke down the doors and brought help. The church bell tolled continuously and the cemetery with its newly-turned earth resembled a ploughed field. Its like had not been seen in England since the Black Death when the watchman called "Bring out your dead."

But the scourge passed, and Northedge, rather shaky on its pins, went back to work. Peace feelers were in the air. The papers were full of rumours, but Northedge believed neither papers nor rumours. It worked with a dull, leaden habit. And yet rumour, for once spoke truth.

On a grey November morning the pit syren hooted. Not the nerve-racking wail of warning, but a long, confident note. The foundry syren joined in. Far off down the valley the thin sound of hooters in every key hung in the misty air. The shunting engine in the sidings caught the infection and sent out a piercing blast. The wheezy bell of the mission church clanged rustily. Out from their doors the good wives came, anxious, frightened, hopeful.

"The war's over!"

They were too stunned to believe it.

"The war's over," they repeated mechanically.

Old crones by the chimney corner rapped with their sticks and demanded to be told what all this mumbling was about.

"You never tell me owt," they cackled.

"It's all ower, gran'ma. The war's over."

"And about time, too."

"Eh, well," sighed the good wives, "this wain't get the work done."

"Work!" exclaimed the youngest housewife. "I'm going out."

And she flounced off in her little tight skirt.

"The hussy," they sniffed. "She's no better than she should be. She'd better make hay while t'sun shines. Wait till her man comes home. He'll show her the way to go."

But all the youngsters slipped off their aprons, patted their hair into place, and rushed after her. From the British School came the roof-lifting three cheers of two hundred small boys who were gaining a half-holiday. Then it must be true.

It was Mother Hubbard's baking day. Even though Empires toppled and trumpets of victory blared, men had to be fed. But the strength had gone out of her arms ; she felt suddenly old and infinitely weary. The grim mouth wavered, her face puckered, and sobs of relief shook her heavy frame. Then Abby ran in, chattering of the Armistice, whatever that was, and she had to pull herself together.

Even when the Pit had knocked off and scratch brass bands were parading the street, it was difficult to grasp that the nightmare was over. When dusk fell, dark curtains were ripped down, and street lamps were re-lit ; the chairman of the Urban District Council made an inaudible speech from the upper window of the Rate Office ; the massed choirs of Ebenezer, Top Chapel, and Bottom Chapel sang the Hallelujah Chorus and 'Rule, Britannia,' and Eli swaggered home, fighting drunk. But the women in mourning banged their doors to keep out the sound of revelry which had come too late.

Enoch was the first home. He was demobbed early in January, and he wasted no time in going back to the Pit. In the summer, he would play cricket—all day and every day—and he wanted money to live on until he became a "pro." John, who had seen no fighting, soon followed him, but Moses was sent with the Army of Occupation to Wiesbaden.

Eli had been shaken by the 'flu, and his long spells of full time. Five sons had sprung from his loins. Why shouldn't they take up the burden? So he worked three

shifts a week, paid his board (just like a lodger, Mother Hubbard said) and transacted a great deal of business with Joby Jacob's runner who lounged outside the Red Lion during opening hours. He specialised in any-to-come bets, but very little did come.

Enoch kept himself fit by hard work, and in April started to get in form for the season. Even when the rime was on the grass, he would take Abby with him to the cricket field and practise bowling at a single stump. It was Abby's task to stand behind this stump and stop the ball, but he preferred to stop it with his coat some thirty yards further back. Even then it cracked him on the shins sometimes or eluded him and made him run miles and miles, but all Enoch's sarcasm wouldn't make him stop it with his hands.

"Knocker's daft," everybody said, for in Northedge you played football until the end of April. Everything in due season. But Enoch knew what he was doing. Before May started, he was bowling at the nets of Trent Bridge, where some of the old hands gave him a few wrinkles. He already had a good pace and a remarkably accurate length. But that wasn't good enough for the Trent Bridge turf. However fast the ball sped through the air, the turf took all the devil out of it. It came off the pitch at an easy pace, and wouldn't rise more than stump high. So Enoch experimented. He improved his run so that he didn't lose momentum, learned to make full use of his modest five feet and a half, and found that last-minute flick of a flexible wrist which made his bowling whip off the pitch faster than it travelled through the air. And one day he bowled George Gunn. True it was only at the nets and the batsman was playing one of his experimental shots, but George Gunn was big game. Southerners could puff Hobbs to the sky, and Yorkshiremen could rave about young Herbert Sutcliffe, but the men of Notts knew that George was the best batsman in the world.

While England exported coal at eight pounds a ton, money came easily to Northedge. John reached his heart's desire and became the owner of a motor-bike. It was a

red projectile which would zoom along at fifty miles an hour, and was known as the Red Peril. John took it to pieces more often than was necessary and kept it as shiny as a new pin. Mother Hubbard grumbled when engine oil was brought into her kitchen—pit dirt was bad enough—but she was secretly glad that John had a hobby to keep his mind off wenches. Half of John's generation invested in machines of similar capacity.

Tim Truman's wife caused a sensation at Ebenezer when she rustled up the aisle in a sealskin coat. The wives of other "butties" followed suit, and those who couldn't run to real sealskin made a brave show with dyed coney. Upright pianos began to be delivered in the miners' cottages, replacing the harmoniums and little American organs of an earlier generation. This was the time when the story of two grand pianos in a miner's parlour appeared in the London papers. It was in the paper, so it must be true, but it didn't happen at Northedge. There wasn't a single parlour big enough to house even one.

The "old standards" saw no good in these things. They were denounced from the pulpit but in general terms. Ministers might like to denounce with accusing forefinger the wearers of sealskin coats, but they had to consider the schoolroom debt, and it wouldn't do to drive away the fur coats to the established church.

"It wain't last," said Mother Hubbard, watching the easy money being burned.

John didn't understand why it shouldn't last. He didn't understand why pianos, motors, and fur coats were all right for the rich and just sinfulness for the poor. When he couldn't be put down by any other means, he was told it was nowt but Socialism. That made John really interested in Socialism. He wanted to know just what it was. As nobody at home could enlighten him, he adopted his father's slogan, and went to the fountain head. In this case it was his lodge secretary who advised him to look in at the headquarters of the Social Democratic Federation in the city. John wasted no time.

He found the institute in one of the narrow mediaeval

streets which climbed up to Castle Hill. He groped up two flights of carpetless stairs and knocked at the door. A party seemed to be in progress. The door opened a crack .

"Is Mr. Jones in?" asked John.

"Comrade Jones," corrected the doorkeeper. "Yes, he's here. Hi, Bill! Wanted."

Mr. Jones appeared, wiping the remains of a tomato sandwich from his mouth. He smiled, and gripped John's hand.

"A worker's hand," he said appreciatively. "The type we want. Come in and see us. We've got a hop on."

The hop was in full swing. Solemn Marxians, their brows wrinkled from wrestling with 'use value' and 'exchange value' gave the same owl-like deliberations to the new Tango. Girls, dressed in new jumpers, puffed cigarettes as they danced.

"Your lodge secretary said you might call," said his host. "Care to have a sandwich? There's some ham, if you eat flesh. I don't. I live on unfired vegetable food, the natural food of man in its natural state."

"But Socialism," objected John, "doesn't mean 'vegetarianism,' does it?"

"Mine does. But some of the comrades don't go so far. Some drink beer, for instance. I ought to have asked you if you'd like some. We're a registered club, you know. We have to keep in with the law," he added apologetically, "even our anarchist members."

"Not bomb throwers?" gasped John.

"We threw bombs at German workmen. Why shouldn't we throw a few at our capitalist bosses? But actually they're only philosophic anarchists. You must talk to them,"

"But what," asked John, "exactly is Socialism?"

"Well, we've all got our definitions. I'll introduce you to the secretary."

A furtive little man with a screwed-up face presented himself.

"A new comrade," explained Jones.

"He can't be a comrade until he's passed the Committee. So you want to join us?"

"Not so fast," said John. "I want to find out what you're after."

"Socialism." He spoke as the warden of some great secret.

John's face must have looked blank, for he rattled like a gramophone record.

"Socialisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange."

"How?" pressed John who knew the vastness of collieries and their accompanying blast furnaces, foundries and machine shops. He couldn't see this little man running them.

"By the class war," he answered. "Read what Lenin says."

He stuffed papers in his hands and sidled away. Before John left, his pockets bulged with pamphlets. He couldn't get a grip on these people. They lived in a ghostly world of their own, and made no attempt to join up their knowledge with his practical experience. Theirs was the light. They were the jealous guardians of the Ark of the Covenant, and they didn't want him butting in.

"Must you go?" asked Comrade Jones. "Bit unfortunate you dropped in to-night. Not one of our serious nights, you know. Blast! Some bastard's put a bit of ham in this sandwich. Excuse me."

Having disposed of the offending ham, he opened the door and warned John of the crazy stairs.

"Whew!" muttered John as he reached street level, "are these people going to organise a revolution and run industry? Why, they can't even keep their stairs clean."

And he went to the second house at the Empire.

Then, soon after the war, he attended the birth of the new Labour Party. It was a dull winter's day and the fog had penetrated into the cold schoolroom. Half the audience wore rusty black for someone lost in the mud of Passchendaele or the shambles of the Somme. They stood and sang uncertainly "God Save the People,"

coughed and rustled back into their seats, and then listened to the new party bosses. Glib men, earnest men, Trade Union men and Co-op. men going in for politics. John saw no hope in them. They were not good enough for these tired, war-worn men and women, like his father and mother, who wanted to be left alone, but who were ready for one last effort to make the world better for those of their children who remained. These leaders were men with a vested interest in agitation. They'd used the gift of the gab to climb out of their jobs. If they had a chance they'd use it to climb out of their class. They whined too much about the poor working men. John wanted leaders who had a fierce pride in their jobs, who chose to be miners just because mining was a man's job, demanding a man's strength, skill, and courage. A man should choose to be a miner, just as he would choose to be a sailor. Without ever having heard the word, John became a syndicalist.

He joined the Labour Party, but he had no hopes of it. He joined the Workers' Educational Association, the Plebs, the League of Nations Union, and I.L.P. He was an enthusiastic joiner at this period, a regular attender of meetings. Some good he found in all these societies, and if he couldn't swallow their doctrines whole, they led to a little healthy argument. He wished he dared get up and speak his mind in public, but his knees turned to water at the mere thought. Then the summer of 1919 came, and the red motor-bike roared over the countryside—to the Peak, to Skegness, and once to Liverpool—and meetings were forgotten or remembered with a faint contempt.

That summer saw Enoch's ambition granted. He was picked to play for Notts against Yorkshire. His name was printed in the paper. Mother Hubbard had to put on her glasses to see it.

"Eh, and that's my son," she sighed.

"There's a bit more here," exclaimed Abby excitedly.

"*Against Yorkshire at Bramall Lane, Notts are introducing a promising colt. Hubbard, who hails from Northedge, is a fast-medium bowler with an easy action,*" she read out slowly.

"Wheer's Bramall Lane?"

"It's Sheffield, Mam. I wish it was Trent Bridge. Then I'd go."

Eli was delighted with the news. He basked in reflected glory all the day, and drank with everyone who congratulated him on rearing such a son. He intended to lose a shift so that he might see Enoch in action against Yorkshire. Yes, he'd take his bit of snap and make a day of it, sitting up there on Spion Kop and having a bit of an argument with those Sheffield chaps, their tongues as keen-edged as the blades they made. And he wouldn't let on who he was. He'd just wait till Enoch upset the pulpit of their Herbert Sutcliffe who, they reckoned, was going to play for England. Then he might tell 'em. They'd say, "Sithee, yon's a gradely lad," which was the daft way Yorkshire folk talked; and he'd reply, "That's non for me to say. Tha see, he's my son."

He got up next morning, spruced himself, and suggested a packet of snap.

"I'm for Bramall Lane," he explained.

"So I thowt," said Mother Hubbard. "Another shift missed."

"Aye, and *thee* looks all dolled up for a week-day."

"I'm coming wi' thee," she announced.

Eli looked dumbfounded.

"He's my son, just as much as thine," she explained.

In vain Eli protested that she knew nothing about cricket, that she'd be tired and hot, perhaps faint in the crowd. She had set her mind on seeing Enoch in his first big match, and nothing would shake her.

"I can go by mysen," she insisted. "You only took me to Sheffield once when Moses was in hospital. So I reckon I can find my way to this Bramall Lane."

"That'll do," he said. "I'll take thee, nivver fear. But I dunna budge until stumps is drawn at half-past six. If you want to come home before, you'll come alone."

She packed him off early and said she'd meet him at the bus stop because she didn't want to embarrass him before his friends. Afterwards, she knew, he would be right with her; in fact, he might be glad of her company. It turned

out as she expected. The journey seemed quite short, though it reminded her of that other grim journey when her son lay wounded in the Great Northern Hospital. Another tram journey, a squeeze through the turnstile (Yes, thought Mother Hubbard ruefully, I could almost have slipped through without paying once), a hard wooden seat high up on a bank overlooking a rectangular piece of turf. The sun filtered through Sheffield's smoke pall and was not too hot. As yet, the crowd was thin, and she was the only woman in that part of the ground.

The bell tolled, and two men in long white coats came out.

"The umpires," explained Eli in a hoarse whisper. (What's he whispering for? she thought.)

Then eleven men in nice white flannels strolled down the steps, hands in pockets, looking as if it was quite an everyday thing to play before a crowd.

"We've lost t'toss," said Eli mournfully, but brightened up to add, "but we shall see our Enoch bowl. Look. There's the lad, yonder."

"Eh!" she sighed. "He looks nice. I hope he doesn't dirty that clean shirt."

"Here's the batsmen," interrupted Eli, hastily. "Holmes is the one wi' cap on. T'other's Herbert Sutcliffe."

"Eleven, twelve, thirteen," counted Mother Hubbard, "all in white flannels. You men do make a sight of washing wi' your games."

"Hist!" whispered Eli.

Then the game began. A man strode thirty paces, hacked a mark in the turf with his heel. A red ball was tossed to him. He began to run, twisted himself like a Catherine Wheel, and hurled the ball at the man with the bat. He stopped it, and then it all happened over again. Enoch didn't seem to be doing much. He stood at the extreme edge of the turf, and only moved after every six balls.

"Playing theirsens in," explained Eli. "It'll brighten up in a bit."

Sure enough it did. Suddenly the man with the bat swung it above his head and hit the ball hard and true. Then they saw Enoch running at breakneck speed, saw him gather the ball, and hurl it into the middle of the ground.

"Good lad," said Eli.

And so it went on for two hours. It was nice and peaceful there in the mild sunshine, and if the seat had been comfortable, Mother Hubbard might have enjoyed forty winks. The players went in to lunch, and Mother Hubbard opened her packet of sandwiches while Eli slipped off to get a bottle of beer. And they enjoyed the first picnic of their lives together. Then the bell clanged again, and the players came out. There were many more spectators now, and they had a lot to say about the play. Eli, who had been there from the beginning, was able to tell them what had happened before lunch, and the traditional reserve of the British, never very strong in these parts, was broken down.

The opinion of Spion Kop was that the players had taken "something" with their lunch, because the batsmen became much less sedate, and stepped out of the crease and cracked the ball time and again. The bowlers were changed two or three times, but the batsmen went on hitting in their lordly way. Mother Hubbard's head began to nod again. Sitting still was harder than baking and scouring. And she would love a cup of tea. Then Eli nudged her.

"Eh! Look," he said.

It all looked the same to her.

"Enoch's going on," he whispered.

Yes. Enoch, her Enoch, had the ball now. It wasn't red any longer, she noticed. He was waving his arms to the players as if giving directions.

"Fast bowler," said a Sheffielder.

"Who is he?" he appealed to Eli.

"Fellow named Hubbard," said Eli with quiet relish.

"New man."

Herbert Sutcliffe glanced round at the array of slips.

"Don't hurt him, Herbert," shouted a voice from the opposite end of Spion Kop, "he's nobbut a lad."

Enoch walked thirty paces in a purposeful way (and his father and mother walked with him in spirit). He turned on his heel, ran swiftly, stretched himself to his full height, and hurled the ball down. Sutcliffe stepped across the wicket to watch and lifted his bat, his pads ready to stop the ball if it broke in. But the ball got up awkwardly and Sutcliffe jerked his head back.

"Whew!" everybody sighed.

The ball was tossed to Enoch again. Again he flung down a fast one. Sutcliffe brought his bat down on it hastily but safely. Everybody was asking who was this kid who was bowling. Eli beamed with joy. Mother Hubbard glowed with pride, although she didn't quite know what her Enoch was doing. The third ball was pitched rather short on the leg stump. It rose head high. Sutcliffe took it off his eyebrows and cracked it past square leg.

"Pitch 'em on the off stump, lad," wailed Eli.

"Give t'lad a chance, Herbert!" shouted the noisy man.

Enoch hitched up his trousers and stuck his jaw out. Eli nodded approvingly. (Gi'e him some stick, lad.) But experience told. However fast Enoch flung them down Sutcliffe seemed to have all the time in the world to smother them.

A thin crackle of applause greeted the end of the over—the tribute of connoisseurs to a new bowler—and tribute from a partisan crowd is not to be despised.

"Well," summed up Eli when Enoch was taken off, "t'lad's done well. He's bowled against two o' the' best batters in England, and they've only ta'en eighteen runs off him in four overs. They had to treat him wi' proper respect and all."

Mother Hubbard had only a vague idea of what happened after that. She could hardly keep her eyes open even when she worried whether Hilda could get Abby's tea without accident. It was hotter now in that press of humanity. Little beads of sweat trickled down her neck.

She fanned herself with a "card of the match" while Eli had draped his handkerchief over his neck. Men, men everywhere. Wizen men, dried in the forge, bandy miners, knowing city chaps who chewed and smoked, spat, argued, and swore, men who criticised her Enoch. Down below, white-robed figures weaved a pattern on the green turf.

And then she disgraced herself in the eyes of this masculine world. Enoch bowled, the batsman pushed the ball forward, his partner called him, they ran. A fielder swooped on the ball, and flung it to the bowler's end. It was a wild shot, and caught Enoch on the thigh just as he was turning to cover the stumps. He lost his balance and fell.

Then Mother Hubbard could contain herself no longer. Rising to her full height, she shouted, "Who threw that ball at my son?"

CHAPTER XI

MOSES wrote that he might be sent to Archangel, or he might be demobbed. He didn't care which; one place was as good as another. That stung Mother Hubbard to unaccustomed letter-writing. She rarely touched a pen, and family letters were left to Eli. But he made such a fuss of them.

"Wheer's the ink. Where hast 'a hidden the writing-paper?" And then, very ominously, "Who's been at my pen? All this writing at school and then you ha'e to come home and spoil my pen."

When the nib had been straightened, the table cleared, and the whole family shushed into silence, father rolled up his shirt sleeves and 'wrestled' with correspondence. With his head on one side, he scratched away at "hoping you are quite well as it leaves us just middling," to its triumphant finish, "God be with you till we meet again,

Martha, Eli and all," when he finally wiped the nib on his breeches, and the family breathed again.

No. She wouldn't ask Eli this time, and she couldn't call on "her scholars," Abby and Dave, because she wanted to speak her mind about Aggie, and the children would never learn from her lips that Aggie was a disappointment, though to be sure a body never knew just how much the sharp-eared little jockeys had picked up already.

So she wrote laboriously and told her son he had to come home and take up his life with Aggie. He must always remember she was his wedded wife, taken for better or for worse, who was waiting for him in the little home he had made for her. She was lonely up there on Moorside all by herself, and it wasn't good for young lasses to be lonely.

And there she drew to a conclusion, in haste to catch the post, because she didn't want to blurt out that the gossips said Aggie wasn't as lonely as all that, and if she didn't take care, she'd get herself tin-panned out of the parish. Mother Hubbard didn't believe such rubbish. Anyway, she wasn't going to believe it.

She felt it her duty to visit her daughter-in-law. If Moses was to be saved, she must be drawn into the family circle, and somebody would have to break the ice. Dressed in her best, sequins and all, she climbed the long hill, and was so short of breath when she knocked at the door that Aggie felt sorry for the old lady, and gave her a cup of tea. The atmosphere was still starchy, but it encouraged Mother Hubbard to tell her exactly how Moses liked his steamed puddings making, and how his pit singlets should be washed to make them last.

Aggie sat through this absent-mindedly, a secret smile on her face, with her head cocked to one side as if listening to something outside the room. A bit queer, thought Mother Hubbard, but that's the moor. All dwellers on the moor became queer. They were alone with their fancies too much.

Why, on the way home she didn't meet a soul until she reached Main Street, except young Luke Fidler with whom

she passed the time of day. And why he should be going that way was more than she could guess. No, it was too lonely up there for a young lass. She must visit her more often until Moses came home. Pray God he would come soon. She wished he could return in time for the Choir Excursion. He never missed that, even if he missed choir practice.

But he did not return in time, and the choir had to manage without him. His presence was hardly missed, for the choir swelled to heroic proportions on this great day. Old gentlemen, whose manly bass had become a piping treble, young gentlemen with recent and uncertain baritones, shrill young ladies, inaudible old ladies, child vocalists who were only in the Sunday School, all became choir members for this day only.

Northedge was early astir. Before the mists had left the meadows, worthy folk in their Sunday best hastened down Birkin Lane and along the still shuttered High Street. The excursion was not due to leave for an hour, but trains were such capricious things that risks could not be run. It was more like a general exodus than a mere choir excursion off to London where Parliament sat and strikes were settled. Northedge didn't quite trust London, but wanted to have a look at it.

The train was signalled, and two crisp rings on the bell announced it was backing from the siding up to the platform. Brown paper parcels and string bags were hugged tighter ; mothers grasped their children and lugged them away from the platform edge ; fathers felt yet again in their pockets to make sure the tickets were still there and not back again on the mantelpiece under the figure of the Prince Consort ; committee men, brave with rosettes, dashed importantly up and down.

Carriages were stormed, and youngsters wrestled for corner seats, while parents, left behind on the platform, shouted last warnings of the dangers of London. Nearly everybody said, " We shan't be long now," which they repeated at intervals until the train really did start. Before it was out of the cutting, young Ike had opened his parcel

of snap and bit a great crescent from a ham sandwich. All the lads and lasses who had breakfasted a whole hour before discovered how hungry they were, and out came *their* snap. Once food was out of the way, the passengers remembered they formed a choir, and sang long, melancholy hymns, and were divinely happy.

In a separate compartment labelled "Reserved," John Henry, the choirmaster, ran over the programme with his helpers.

"Sithee," he said earnestly, "we mun keep together. These young lasses, tha knows—"

"Aye," breathed the committee, rather unctuously, savouring the memory of last Sunday's papers. "London's none the place for young lasses."

However big the choir seemed on Northedge departure platform, it shrank on contact with London's immensity. The rosetted committee men encircled their flock like sheep dogs, snatched unwary lads from under the bonnets of omnibuses, and rounded them up at the turnstiles which led to the Zoo. After that there were leakages. Ike was lost and was reported last seen in the monkey house. Several matrons discovered a homely tea shop and refused to go a step further "not if they were paid for it," a number of young ladies were reported missing after passing Oxford Street. These were minor casualties, but the main army was intact.

Late in the afternoon, John Henry, footsore and flustered, drove the rearguard before him along the corridors of the Tube. He reached the lift just as the gates slammed in his face, and saw his party ascend without him into the unknown. With considerable acumen, he darted into the next lift.

When, only a minute later, he emerged into the sunshine, London had swallowed up his choir. He wandered along the Strand to Fleet Street, crossed over with a wild scurry and came back on the other side. Still no sign of his choir. Negroes, Lascars, barristers in their wigs, bespatted merchant princes, soldiers, sailors, every kind, race and condition of men, but no choir.

Finally he ventured into the maelstrom, and reached an island from which a policeman directed the traffic. John Henry tapped him on the shoulder.

"Eh oop, lad," he said. "Hast seen owt of a choir from Northedge?"

By some miracle, the scattered fragments of the choir gathered together at midnight under the great clock of St. Pancras, and all were safe.

"Nivver again so long as I live," decided John Henry. "It'll be Skeggy next year or nowt."

The train pounded through the night and the choir slept.

Moses came home unexpectedly. He had written, but he had travelled faster than his letter. A wire had never occurred to him. Wires from foreign parts were expensive, and you didn't send wires unless people were dead.

He was tall and ruddy with health and looked fine in his uniform.

"Sit you down," commanded his mother, "and have a bite of tea."

"That's reight, lad," added his father. "Look less on legs. Ha'e a bite wi' t'owd folk afore you go up yonder. When Aggie sees thee, she won't want to waste time getting tea."

Moses took off his tunic and sat at the table.

"That's good," he sighed, as he looked at the generous spread. The boys hovered round and couldn't take their eyes off him. Hilda perched herself on his knee. Then neighbours came round, shouted, "Anybody in?" and lifted the latch.

"Well, if it isn't your Moses! I said to our Arthur, I said, 'There's summat going off at them Hubbards.' So I came to see for mysen. Eh, lad, you look grand. Hasta come home for good?"

And so it went on, with everybody talking at once at the top of their voices. When the last neighbour had said good-night for the third and last time, and the children had gone out to play round the gas-lamps, Eli filled his pipe and sat down for a heart-to-heart talk with his son.

"What dost'a make of them Rooshians?" he asked.

"That can keep for another day," said Mother Hubbard.

"He's got a wife at home waiting for him."

"Aye," admitted Eli, "I can see he's pawing the ground like a stallion. Be off wi' you. See thee to-morrow, 'appen."

"I'd better be getting along. Good-night, Mam. Cheerio, Dad."

The door clanged behind him. The old man rustled his evening paper, and Ma Hubbard cleared away. The house was very still now.

"Does *she* know he's coming?" Eli asked suddenly. He always called her *she*.

"Not unless somebody's seen him and tould her."

"We ought to have sent Abby to warn her."

"Warn her?"

"Well," floundered Eli, "a man his size needs a bit of packing. He'll want some eggs and bacon in the morning and shops'll be all closed long since."

"That's none what you meant Eli, and you know it. You've heard something. What was it?"

"Nowt," he declared stubbornly. "You know how folks gossip."

"About Luke Fiddler?"

"Aye."

"What shift is he on?"

"Early shift. He'll be home now."

"Will he be home?"

"How can I tell, lass? He's a prowling Tom Cat, and if he isna in one home, he'll be in another."

"If Moses finds him with Aggie?"

"That's what I've been afeard of. We ought to have warned her. But it's 'appen all for t'best. If she's a whore and a strumpet it's best in the long run he should know."

Ma Hubbard sat down on the sofa and rocked herself.

"My son," she sighed, "my poor lad."

Then the children raced in, swallowed their supper, and babbled of what they would do now Moses was home.

Hilda meant to rehearse her act with him on the morrow. Abby had thought out some special scenery, and Dave had promised indulgently to write up the Act in proper English. They continued their plans long after they were in bed. John, back from his tutorial class, and Enoch from his courting, smoked a last pipe and glanced at the paper, yawned and went upstairs. The old folks still sat by the fire.

"Bed, old lass," said Eli firmly.

He shoo'd her off the hearthrug because he couldn't wind up the clock until he had elbow room, while she filled the kettle and put it on the hob. Then he raked the fire while she fetched in a handful of sticks to dry in the hearth for morning. Finally he locked the door, turned out the gas, kicked off his shoes, and creaked up the stairs in his stockinged feet. Mother Hubbard followed, but first she went to the door and quietly unlocked it. Moses might come back. Then upstairs to lie rigid and still on the big bed, waiting and listening. She heard all the little noises of the night. The creaking of furniture which meant a change of weather, the swift streak of a mouse across the floor, the hoot of an owl over the waste lands, the falling of a coke in the grate, a hiss of escaping steam from the shunting yard, the whine of a motor-bike in the distance. Was that the owl again? Or a human voice? All quiet again. The steady crump of the policeman on his beat. The panting of a goods train up the incline. A cricket chirping in the kitchen hearth. The night was alive with noises.

Eli slept, breathing heavily, and twitching from time to time. Dreaming. She could hear the rhythmic breathing of her boys through the plaster walls, sleeping as though nothing was happening. Quite suddenly, she could endure this waiting no longer. She slipped out of bed warily, groped for the door and crept downstairs. She lit a candle with shaking fingers, put on her outdoor coat over her nightdress, teemed some of the water from the kettle so that it would boil the quicker, and promised herself a cup of tea. Then she waited.

Her Moses was in trouble. He had married a wanton. Northedge had its share of light o' loves who couldn't wait until their men came home. Mother Hubbard had heard of them, but she had shrugged her shoulders and gone about her business. Now it had happened to Moses, and it would hurt him.

A footfall. Mother Hubbard stiffened. The slow, stumbling steps of a drunken man. Not that way, Oh, God, she prayed. Don't let it take Moses like that. She's none worth it. The steps came nearer, and stopped. Then the catch was raised cautiously and the door opened.

"Come in, lad," whispered Mother Hubbard.

Moses lurched into the room, swayed, but pulled himself up. His face was gaunt, and the blood had drained from it. It was not a face, but a mask. The tired, dead eyes looked at something beyond the kitchen.

"Sit thee down," she whispered, "I'll get thee a hot cup of tea."

He shook his head and buried his face in his hands.

She mashed two strong cups and placed one before him.

"Sup that and you'll feel better, lad."

But he took no notice. She drank her scalding tea to keep her teeth from chattering, and waited. The clock ticked on remorselessly. If he wouldn't speak, she'd have to.

"You've been up yonder?" she wrenched out in a voice that wasn't hers.

He nodded mulishly.

"You've seen her?" she persisted.

He nodded again. Seen her? By God, he had seen her. He was seeing her now. The light shining behind the blind of the upper window. His knock at the door. A long pause. "Who is it?" in a high voice. "It's me, Moses," he had shouted. Then another wait and the door opened, and she stood there, in her shift, her breasts rising and falling, her face rosy with sleep. His arms went round her soft form and he lifted her like a baby. "Back to bed," he said. "No, no," she struggled. "You must ha'e supper." "Nay," he said, seeking her red lips, "I canna

wait. I've waited eighteen months." "You're hurting me," she said, "put me down." "On the bed," he insisted. "Nay," she said, "down here. By the fire. As we used to." And they piled cushions and made a nest on the hearthrug, and then . . .

"What is it, lad?" asked Mother Hubbard anxiously. "What dost'a hear?"

He shook his head. He wasn't hearing anything in this house. His head was resting on his wife's breast when he heard a creak upstairs. He stiffened instantly. "Only the wind," soothed Aggie. "It's a barn of a house. Why, sometimes—" Why was she talking loud like this about a creaking board? He relaxed again. And again above his head a creak like a pistol shot. "Someone there," he muttered rising to his knees. "Don't be so jumpy," she pleaded, "you're all nerves." Even then he didn't suspect her. "I'm going up to see." "You mustn't. Don't leave me." "Come with me." "No, no, I dassent." And suddenly the scales fell from his eyes. "Stop here!" he commanded. He leaped to his feet and scrambled up the narrow stairs.

"Tell me, Moses," his mother was saying. "Get it off thy mind. She's nobbut a lass, and they're all flighty at that age."

He snapped his fingers angrily. He was going upstairs now. He had pushed open the door of her room. Their room. The tumbled bed, the candle guttering in the draught from the wide-open window. So that's how he'd escaped. The figure crawling like a cat along the gutter—afraid to drop. The rush downstairs, out into the back yard—

"Dids't see any other body?"

What was she saying?

"Luke Fiddler?" she pressed.

He nodded. So that was the fellow's name. Sneaking out of the window, and dropping softly like a Tom Cat into the yard.

The hard look in his eyes frightened Mother Hubbard.

"Promise me, son," she pleaded, "that you wain't hurt

him. For my sake. They might send thee down t'line, and I couldn't bear my son to be in gaol."

Hurt him. Why, he'd just caught him as he fell and shook him like a rat, and then flung him away.

"You wain't hurt him?" she persisted.

"Nay," he croaked in a strange voice. "I wain't hurt him."

"He'll 'appen leave Northedge."

"He's left. He's—he's dead."

Why was she staring at him like that? How was he to know a grown man's back would break like a doll's when he was flung down?

"Moses! Moses! What are you saying? Hast'a killed him?"

Moses nodded.

Her world reeled and crashed about her. This was the end. She sat, paralysed with fear.

"Oh, God!" she prayed wildly. "They'll ta'e him and hang him. Let them ta'e me instead."

But they wouldn't take her instead. They would take her first-born. The judge would put on his black cap and utter those terrible words, "to be hanged by the neck until you are dead."

The numbing horror passed slowly and the indomitable spirit of the old lady rose. If anything had to be done, she would have to do it. She went over to Moses and shook him.

"Pull yourself together, lad," she croaked.

He twisted his lips into a frosty little smile.

"That's better," she said. "Blow out the light."

"Whaffor?"

"No need to—to let people know you're here."

"They'll find me all right."

But he blew it out.

"They're not to find thee."

"Does it matter?" he asked wearily.

"It matters to me. I'm not giving thee up. Your tea's cowed. I'll mash some more. And you'll put it inside thee."

She forced him to drink the hot tea, but she couldn't persuade him to eat. But her knife flashed in the firelight as she cut slices of bread and ham, and filled his old snap tin.

"You'll hide," she said.

"Where?"

"On the moors."

"They'll hunt me down."

"What! An old soldier?"

"What about snap?"

"You leave that to me. Abby can bring more tomorrow."

There was a derelict farm at Thurlstone Edge with an ivy-covered barn. Abby often went there when he was playing one of his daft solitary games. He could leave a snap tin in a dark corner, and Moses could come along at night and pick it up. Just for a few nights until they'd thought out a plan. Moses listened in sullen silence.

Mother Hubbard goaded him, lashed him with her tongue, and tried to pour her vitality into her son. Bit by bit, the numbness left him. He felt, as she meant him to feel, a mounting resentment. Why had this thing happened to him? Soon his mind began to play with the idea of giving them a run for their money. They couldn't do more than hang him. When Mother Hubbard saw his jaw set, she sighed with relief.

A few minutes later, she opened the door cautiously. The coast was clear. She pulled her son's head down to her and kissed him full on the mouth, then pushed him on his way. His footsteps padded away into silence.

It was idle to go to bed now. She made up the fire, creaked upstairs to get her clothes, and dressed in the kitchen. Pale streaks of light appeared in the east before she had finished her toilet. She was shivering although her head was burning, but she bathed her forehead in cold water and braced herself for the day's duties.

She cut slices of fat bacon and put them in the pan, cut many thick chunks of home-made bread, fetched four eggs from the earthenware jar and put them ready to crack.

Then she toiled up the stairs again to wake her men who were on the early shift.

Eli was the first down. He slithered across to the fire in his stockinged feet and crouched before its blaze.

"B-r-r-r-h. It's cowl in the morning."

"Not it," said Mother Hubbard. "You're nesh."

"I'm not so young as I wor," confessed Eli. "'Appears I feel the cowl more."

"We're all getting owder," sighed Mother Hubbard.

"Aye, lass, we are. Why, I nivver noticed it before, but look at your hair lass."

"What's the matter wi' my hair? It's been growing grey long sin."

"Grey? It's white, lass. Nivver mind. 'As your hair grows whiter I will love thee more.' Gi'e us a kiss, lass."

"That's enough of thy nonsense. Get that snap inside thee. I've summat to tell thee. But not on an empty stomach."

CHAPTER XII

THE police constable and the sergeant marched down the Rows. Not the routine measured tread with eyes roving in impassive faces. A more purposeful march. They were after somebody. Every woman looked out from behind her lace curtains and sighed with relief when they had passed. (It wasn't their Jim or their Harry this time.) They stood on their rock-like feet outside No. 42, and the constable hammered on the door.

"Them Hubbards," commented the Rows. "What have they been up to? Well, well. Pride goes before a fall."

Mother Hubbard opened the door just a crack. Expertly, the constable slid his foot against it.

"Well?" she said. "What is it?"

"You don't want all the neighbours to hear," said the sergeant.

"Come thee in," agreed Mother Hubbard.

In the kitchen they looked overpowering.

"Well?" she asked, looking up at them.

"Now, Mother," began the sergeant. "You got a lad called Moses?"

She nodded. Her eyes were pleading. "Don't ask me where he is."

"Just want to ask him a question or two," went on the sergeant. "Isn't he up yet?"

"He's non here," she faltered.

"We'd better make sure. Slip upstairs, constable."

"Very good, sir."

"You've no right—"

"Now then, Ma. Don't make things worse than they are."

"All reet. Look your fill. You wain't find him."

"Then he's hiding?" snapped the sergeant.

She would have to be more careful.

"He doesn't live here."

"I know, Ma. Married Aggie Slater. Lives up at Moorside. Came home from overseas yesterday. Called here in the afternoon."

The constable had clumped down now. He shook his head.

"Bed slept in?"

"All made up, sir."

"I should think so," commented Mother Hubbard, "at this time o' day."

"When did Moses leave the house?"

"About nine o'clock."

"Last night?"

"Aye,"

"Say where he was going?"

"He's a grown man. He doesna ha'e to tell me where he's going."

"He was going to his wife, wasn't he?"

"Why shouldn't he go to his wife?"

"Have you seen him since?"

Mother Hubbard swallowed hard.

"No," she said in a strange voice. (Please God, forgive me.)

The neighbours were pressing their noses against the window panes now. The sergeant jerked his thumb towards them, and the constable opened the door.

"Clear off, you," he bellowed.

"That's better," said the sergeant. "Now sit down, Mother, and we'll have a little chat."

"I've got my work to do."

"It'll keep. And my business won't. It's about your lad, remember."

"What's he been doing?" she demanded.

"I haven't said he's done anything. Only something's happened up at Moorside, and he may be able to throw light on it."

"Well, he's non here," she said. And then she could have bitten her tongue out. She ought to have exclaimed: "What's happened?" It was too late to say it now.

"Doesn't seem to surprise you, Ma. Perhaps Moses looked in just to put you on your guard. Now then, Mrs. Hubbard. You're speaking to an officer of the Law. Where's Moses hiding?"

"I dunno," she whispered. "And if I knowed I wouldna tell thee."

"Get that down, constable."

"Yessir."

The constable sat down at the kitchen table, and wrote laboriously on a foolscap sheet.

"Read it," commanded his sergeant.

"I, Martha Hubbard of 42 Top Long Row, Northedge, hereby state that my son Moses Hubbard called here on Wednesday the 3rd inst., at 3 p.m., having been discharged from H.M. Forces. He stayed here until 9 p.m., when he left to go home to his wife at Moorside. I have not seen him since. I do not know where he is hiding, and if I did I would not give the required information."

The constable paused and coughed to draw his superior's attention to this piece of literature.

"Better stick to her exact words," said the sergeant.
"Can't be too careful in a case like this."

The constable corrected his note.

"Will you sign that statement, Mother?"

Mrs. Hubbard considered this.

"Nay," she decided, "I'll sign nowt."

"Very good," snapped the sergeant.

They stalked off, unhurried, eyes roving in immobile faces.

"She knows where he is," said the constable.

"We'll make the wife talk," muttered the sergeant through the side of his mouth.

Somehow the dreary day passed. Mother Hubbard baked and scrubbed and shook mattresses, for only in labour was the pain dulled. Neighbours looked in to sympathise, and by piecing together their bits of gossip, she reconstructed the scene up at Moorside the night before. Aggie had run screaming from the house and knew nothing or would tell nothing. The limp body of Luke Fiddler had been found by the milkman on his rounds, and the police then stepped in. The only person who knew what had happened up at Moorside was Moses.

Then the family had to be told.

"We're all members one of another," declared Eli, "and the lads will hear anyway. We don't know as it's murder. A mon can kill in self-defence and Luke Fiddler had no right to be where he was. Or it may have been accident."

"Murder or no murder," said Mother Hubbard, "he's my lad."

"I'm non gainsaying that, lass. Whatsoever he's done, we stick to him. But I should be easier in my mind if I thowt t' were an accident."

"What makes thee think it wasna an accident?"

"If it were an accident, he should have gone straight to police. He shouldna have run away."

"I sent him," she said simply. "He wasna for going, but I made him."

Eli shrugged his tired shoulders. You couldn't make women understand the Law. They were anarchists, all.

It wasn't necessary to tell the lads. The news had travelled fast below ground and along the dim galleries. Luke Fiddler had been caught in the act and had been done in. "Poor little bastard," was all the sympathy he got.

After that, Abby left the house with bulging pockets and ran off.

"He'd better tell him to gi'e hisself up," said Eli.

"Nay," rapped Mrs. Hubbard, "we don't know yet what the police know. Let him bide."

Abby left Northedge by the Furnaces and then turned off by the path in the opposite direction, which crossed the Chesterfield road, further to the north. He was taking no chances. The path began to climb and he was now among the bleak little fields enclosed by stone walls which gave excellent cover. And now he could see the lean flank of the open moor stretching away to the Gritstone Edge whose black boulders looked like the ruins of some giant's castle. The coarse, tussocked grass under his feet bowed before the wind. The air up here was crystal clear and the silence was broken only by the haunting cry of the curlew. Now there were patches of magenta heather among the boulders. He had reached no man's land.

He was Chief Crested Eagle whose moccasined feet could tread on a twig without snapping it, loping along with the wolf gait that ate into the long miles like fire. He was trailing his blood brother to warn him that the Pale-faces were on his track.

Suddenly he felt tired and hungry and no longer a Brave. Dusk was shrouding the hills, and it would be dark before he reached home. The barn was just in sight. Far below at the side of a clough. He wished he had not gone such a long way round. He stumbled over the loose stones washed smooth by the stream that ran in winter like a torrent. He was a Brave again now, using the stream to throw the hounds off his track. At last the old barn stood up like a cliff on his left. He was panting now more with excitement than shortness of breath. He reconnoitred cautiously.

The place was deserted. The crazy steps to the left still took his weight. Up he went and hid his burden in the empty cornbin. He hoped the rats wouldn't get it. He'd never seen one here. They only came where there was food, and the cornbin had been empty for years. There was no sign of his brother.

Then back home again, following a straighter path, past Hangman's Hollow, whistling a tune which was meant to be jaunty, and trying not to run past the spot where the Owd Standards swore they'd heard the gibbet creak on windy nights. The sun burned out on the horizon and the world was a dead grey plateau where the wind whistled and primeval shapes crouched ready to strike. Then suddenly below him, almost at his feet, Nothedge lay. A dull hot glow. The Furnaces were being raked. A jewelled necklace across the dim outlines of the countryside. That was High Street. The red and green signal lights on the railway and a gleam of polished steel where the arc lamps of the shunting yard shone on the metals. It spelled safety, warmth, home. He was glad to be back in the cosiness of the kitchen.

They were all at home, clinging together, like a beleaguered garrison. Bad enough to work through the whispered gossip or, still worse, the careful avoidance of gossip. But to face the club, the classroom or the taproom was more than any of them could bear. They were irritable, truculent. They wanted to hit someone, to do something. But nothing could be done.

The inquest was held, and the coroner made the most of it. His views on women's skirts, bobbed hair, post-war morals, cocktails, were reported in the London press. Much to his annoyance, the jury brought in a verdict of Death by Misadventure. But the police continued to search for Moses.

From his eyrie among the crags, Absolam saw the sun glint on dozens of car windows. Men like pigmies were crawling over the scarred face of the moors. Grimly, silently they combed every clough and every thicket. A motor-bus pulled up almost beneath his vantage point.

and a crowd of policemen tumbled out, scattered to right and left. Another motor-bus was parked far away to the North, under Pike's Scar. For the hue and cry was afoot. The policemen had to do it. It was their job. But what of these men who had come from the city in their private cars? What were they doing in the hunt? What had Moses done to them? Abby grew sick with impotent fury as he watched the net gradually tighten. In half an hour more the hand-cuffs would click. Nothing but darkness would save his brother. Abby prayed feverishly, but without hope for the sun to be blotted out.

And then the miracle happened. A thin mist stole out of the upland valleys and spread over the face of the moor. Swiftly and incalculably as if the moor had felt the autumn chill and was putting on a fleecy garment. For a few moments the sweep of russet hills had the fragile quality of a painting on silk. Then its edges blurred, and soon the hills were but phantom shapes, swollen to the size of mountains, rising out of a white sea. Absolam sighed with relief. His brother was safe.

For two more days Abby carried food to the abandoned barn, keeping an eye open for police helmets among the heather. Once the sergeant and the constable shadowed him, and he led them a rare dance over Gibbet Moor and back through Hornsclough on the Derbyshire side. They belonged to the Notts Constabulary and they had no jurisdiction in Derbyshire. They stopped at the boundary to consider this legal point, and Abby escaped.

Every barn had been searched, every inch of moorland had been covered. One day an aeroplane droned slowly over, looking for the fugitive. And then the heath caught fire. From the Rows, Abby noticed a cloud on the horizon. It was smoke, he was sure. John fetched out his motor-bike and Abby begged a seat on the carrier. They roared up the ribbon of road and, leaving the bike under the projecting rocks, climbed up to Abby's eyrie. The sun still shone brightly and no flames were visible. Just a creeping black desolation. The fire had started near the roadside and was spreading down the slopes, the east wind driving great

clouds of smoke before it. They mounted the motor-bike again and made a detour to get in front of the flames. Heat, intolerable prickly heat, the crackle of the devouring invisible flames, the acrid smell. Saplings, erect and gay one minute, crumpled in the heat as a woman's face crumples with tears. And birds and small beasts stampeded from the terror which destroyed their nests and burrows.

Abby tugged John's coat.

"Moses," he said softly.

John nodded. The frenzied scuttling in the undergrowth had reminded him, too, of Moses.

Gamekeepers and labourers were already fighting the fire, beating it out with brushwood. Volunteers were arriving in cars and were sent to arrest the flames before they reached the pine-woods. Once ablaze these would light such a beacon that the dalesmen would be able to read by its light. John itched to join them, but Abby tugged his coat again. Moses came first.

The fire was advancing like a scythe. The left flank crept towards the road to Northedge, while the right, fanned by a stiff breeze was sweeping rapidly towards the reservoir. Unless Moses had scented the danger some hours before, and had scrambled up the Scar, he would be driven before the flames along with all the hunted things. He would be forced towards Northedge and certain capture.

"He may have got away already," suggested John. "If he hasn't, there isn't much time. It's gaining fast."

"I say, John, could we—?"

"Could we what?"

"Go round there and fetch him out on the motor-bike?"

"There's only a rough track. And the flames are jumping across it."

"But if you knew Moses was there—trapped."

"If I knew I'd do it like shot. But I don't know."

"I know. I've seen him."

"Rubbish! You can't see so far."

"Not with my eyes. But I tell you I can see him. He's getting desperate."

Abby's voice was rusty with excitement.

"You're a rum kid. Come on then."

They roared off, made a wide detour, and found a rough bridle track dropping down to the left.

"This is it," said Abby.

"Sit tight," commanded John.

"All right," panted Abby.

The hot air quivered, the stench of charred green vegetation made them cough. Ahead, the flames were licking the grass on both sides of the path. John pulled up. He tried to peer through the pall of smoke ahead.

"Can't see a thing."

Abby slipped off his perch and craned forward to look. The stones burned his feet through his thick shoes.

"Off with you," said John. "Back the way we came."

"Can't I stop here?"

"Do what I tell you, blast you," snapped John. "What good are you doing here? Get back where you can fetch help if it's needed."

"O.K." piped Abby tremulously.

"Tie this handkerchief round my mouth first."

With goggles on, cap drawn closely over his head, and mouth bandaged, John drove forward, slowly bumping his way over the rocky surface with the back wheel as often as not spinning in space. Then with a roar of the exhaust, he burst through the flames and disappeared into the curtain of smoke. Abby strained to keep sight of him with smarting eyeballs but he was blotted out. Yet above the crackle and hiss of flames, he could hear the chugging of his engine. And then suddenly it stopped. Stopped. Did that mean . . . ?

And then the engine roared again. The breeze blew the hot heavy curtain aside and there was the motor-bike climbing up the track towards him. A passenger clung to John's waist. Moses. Face blackened, clothes torn, but alive!

They drew up beside him.

"Well, young 'un," greeted Moses, coughing out the smoke.

"You'd better make your way back, kid," suggested John. "I must get Mo. out of this."

"Give the little beggar a ride," urged Moses. "He can squeeze on."

"I could that," declared Abby.

"Look slippy, then."

"Where are you making for?" asked Moses suspiciously.

"Right out of this district. It's not safe. They've got a cordon round it and they'll tighten the net."

"Why don't you say *noose* and be done wi' it?"

"Lis'en. I'll run you to a station where you can get a train to Liverpool."

"What should I do in Liverpool?"

"Go down to the docks. Get a job. They just pick you out of the crowd with a nod. No questions asked. Get lost in the crowds. There's Lascars, Chinks, Irish, everybody. Then watch your chance and work your passage to the States."

"I dunno," wavered Moses.

"Your only chance," said John. "They're going to use bloodhounds."

Abby shivered. Already he could hear them giving tongue, deep bell notes echoing from crag to crag.

"All right," decided Moses wearily. "And for Christ's sake get on with it."

"O.K. behind?"

"O.K.," sang out Abby, squeezing his thin body into the smallest space ever.

John stamped on the starter, the engine throbbed into action, and they slithered and skidded over the stones. Half a mile of rough riding and they gained the main road, its grey metallic surface gleaming in the last rays of the sun. The machine surged northwards. The heart beat of the engine pulsed steadily and strongly as if holding itself back until the serpentine coils of the road straightened out. Round a double-S bend and right in their path a police-car was parked. A constable stood in the restricted roadway and leisurely examined the licence of a motorist travelling towards Derby. He motioned them to stop.

"Lemme get down," hissed Moses.

"Sit tight," snapped John between his teeth.

John slowed down obediently. The constable handed back the licence and the motorist saluted him. At that instant, John shot forward. The policeman stepped in front of him, palm upraised. John drove at him, all out. At the very last second, the constable writhed out of the way and John roared past. Looking over his shoulder, Abby saw the police-car in motion.

"Go on!" he shouted in John's ear. "They're after us."

It was a nightmare ride in the gathering dusk. Now they were riding by the side of the quiet waters of the Derwent, now they were snaking down steep inclines, then they were roaring over high level country where the stone walls did not obstruct the view and the driver could take chances.

"We're getting near Buxton. Look out for a railway station."

At Taddington they pulled up for petrol, and found their bearings. Just through the village and on the crest of the hill, they turned right and dropped silently down to Millers Dale. A vicious little hill brought them to the station. It was deserted. When the engine was shut off, the silence pressed down on them. In the half light the drab station buildings, the silent trucks, the bare hillsides were all part of a phantom world. They spoke in whispers. Moses hovered in the background while John went to get a ticket.

"He can only book you to Manchester," he explained to Moses. "You've got to cross Manchester and book again. You'll do it all right. Here's a couple of pounds. All I've got. We'll push off. They may have taken the number of my bike and be looking for us. Good luck."

Moses wrung his hand, and shook Abby's too, as if he were grown up.

They returned home by a different route, avoiding the Moor, where they might be held up. They stopped once to see the Moor fire glowing in the distance. The fire had

reached the pine wood now, and great trees were blazing like candles.

"Lis'en," said Abby.

"What is it now?" grinned John. "That's only the wind in the telephone wires."

"'Appen they're sending messages about Moses."

"Stuff," said John. "You are a rum kid."

But before they'd finished supper and before Abby had spluttered out the tale of their adventures, the newsboys were shouting in High Street: "Extry Special. Arrest of the Moorside Murderer." The voice drew nearer. Tight-lipped, John went to the door and whistled.

"Well? Well?" demanded Eli.

"It's true. At Stockport."

Mother Hubbard turned deathly pale, but no sound escaped her lips. Abby crept to bed without a word. A grand adventure like that to end in failure.

CHAPTER XIII

THE family closed up like a hedgehog, all its prickles erect. Bewildered, but determined, ready to fight to the end. A council of war sat in No. 42, Long Row. All the relations from near and far rallied round. Even Uncle Alfred was welcomed.

"What Moses wants," he said from the hearthrug, "is a sound alibi."

"Sound which?" asked Eli.

"Alibi," replied Uncle Alfred. "He wants a reliable witness to go in the box and swear he was sleeping somewhere else on the night of the crime."

"You mean a sound lullaby," said Hilda pertly.

"One more word from you, madam," declared Mother Hubbard, "and off to bed you go."

"Talk sense, man," growled Eli. "He was theer reight enough. More's the pity."

"The case would flop," persisted Uncle Alfred, "if you

could produce an alibi. One good, reliable witness who would take his—or her—Bible-oath that Moses was sleeping peacefully at the time of the catastrophe in his *or her* bed.”

He coughed delicately to indicate that if ladies weren't present he could say a lot more.

“No lies,” said Mother Hubbard.

“Very well, then,” snapped Uncle Alfred. “I’ve told you. See how far *you* get by telling the truth.”

“That’s enough, Alfred.”

Mrs. Hubbard nodded towards the children, who were drinking in this heresy with open eyes.

“Best send ’em to bed.”

“Nay,” replied the mother, “they’re in this along wi’ us all.”

Eli coughed portentously.

“We mun get a good lawyer. Young Masters, he’s a rare lad. He gies ’em some stick on the Bench.”

“No,” John interrupted. “He’s no good. He only kicks up a row and gives you a run for your money. He’s all right for drunks and assaulting the police. But this isn’t his sort of case. We want a sound solicitor and the best counsel we can afford.”

“What’s all that going to cost, lad?”

“That I can tell you,” offered Uncle Alfred. “Without a word of a lie, a leading K.C. gets a fee of one thousand pounds, and what’s more, every day the case lasts, he expects seventy-five pounds more. A refresher, they call it. That right?”

“Yes,” confirmed John. “That’s about it. That’s free justice.”

“We canna afford it,” groaned Eli.

“We got to afford it,” said Mother Hubbard. She quietly assumed leadership of the family.

“Got a bit upstairs?” asked Uncle Alfred, with a sideways jerk of his head.

“There’s the bit to put us away decent,” she admitted. “I’ve scratted for that all my days. Moses can ha’e that. The Parish can bury us. It’s non much, twenty pounds all told.”

"I'll sell my motor-bike," volunteered John.

"You can ha'e the bit I've saved up," offered Enoch.

"I reckon I'll go back to the Pit this winter. It'll keep me fit for next season."

Mrs. Hubbard peered at him above her glasses.

"You were saving that to be wed."

"Liza 'll have to wait."

The family came first. One by one they made their contribution. Eli would try and work a full week again. Dave would have to leave school and start work. Hilda, who was already earning seven shillings a week at the hosiery mills, wanted to hand it all over to help Moses. John said he'd accept the secretaryship of a Working Men's Club because it brought in a small honorarium. Even Abby was not spared. His dream of going to the Nottingham Art School would never come true. His brightly-coloured bubble burst. He would have to go to work.

"Not the Pit," he gasped.

"Nay, not the Pit," agreed Mother Hubbard, hastily.

"A clean job. You can do your bits of painting at nights."

Abby turned very white. He wanted to be sick.

"Poor kid," said Hilda. "You want to help Moses, don't you?"

"I want to paint," he cried, mutinously. The pathetic cry of the artist through the ages when the Philistines drive him to work.

"You leave him to me," said Uncle Alfred. "I've got nothing but a hole in my pocket. But I can fix that young shaver. How would you like a job in the Poster Factory? At Hildreth's? They do all the theatre posters. Real artists they've got there. Some of 'em paint—go up to London and paint the stars. Vi Lorraine, Dolly Sisters, and all. And the youngsters draw the design on stone. You'd be as right as rain there."

Abby could hardly believe his ears. To paint, and be paid for it. To go to London to draw pretty ladies. Perhaps to go to the theatre. The man who drew the posters would have a free pass for certain. He began to dance with joy.

"This isna the time for dancing," said Eli.

“The trouble is,” concluded Uncle Alfred, “to get in. They get all the lads they want. They’ve only got to put their hand up.”

“What are you teasing the child for, Alfred, if you mean to do nowt about it?”

“What do you mean? I said I’d fix the young shaver, and I’ll do my best. Your Uncle Alfred don’t count in this cock-eyed, one-horse colliery midden, but in the city he mixes with the lads. And they set store by his wisdom. Give me some of your best drawings and I’ll show ’em to Hartshorne. He’s their best artist, and I’d have you know, a friend of mine. If they’re any good, he’ll get you a job when you’re old enough to leave school. And I can’t say fairer than that, can I?”

“And what about me?” cried Dave.

Dave didn’t in the least want to be a teacher. But he didn’t like Abby to be the centre of interest. After all, he was Uncle Alfred’s favourite. Why shouldn’t something be done for him?

“You’ll be all right, lad,” Uncle Alfred assured him. “You won’t sink. You don’t need a safe job with your brains.”

But when all the help was added up, it represented a pitifully small amount by the side of the huge sum they would have to borrow. True, they were not left to shoulder the burden alone. While Moses was a hunted fugitive every man’s hand was against him. Now that he was trapped, every man wished to set him free. The Working Men’s Club started a subscription list. The British Legion took a collection. The Colliery manager called on the Hubbards and gave them wise advice on the legal position with the name of a reliable solicitor.

“Our solicitor recommends him,” he said. “He’d like to help you himself, but he’s a specialist in company law, and you must have a man who’s got the criminal law at his finger tips.”

Then later on the same evening one of the loaders looked in. At least, he stood grinning stupidly in the doorway and

seemed to be bursting with speech but could only say, "It's like this 'ere," over and over again.

"Don't stand ammergagging there," cried Mother Hubbard, hustling him inside. So he stood in the kitchen with his cap perched on the back of his head, and answered all questions with "Aye" and "Ah-h." Then he made a stupendous effort and reckoned that the night was drawing in, wiped the sweat off his brow, dived into his pockets and fetched out a handful of soiled notes and silver, which he dropped on the table.

"We had a bit of a whip-round in Top Seam to-day," he said breathlessly. "G'neet all."

And before they could thank him he was gone.

Mother Hubbard found another friend at this time. He was the Police Court Missioner, a dusty little man with pouched eyes, a chain smoker whose ash lodged on every wrinkle of his waistcoat. He knew crime in all its aspects. Nothing that human beings could do astonished him, but he was always ready to help them start again. It wasn't his job to take Mother Hubbard in his baby car to the prison to see Moses. But he did it. It was not visiting day, but he saw the prison governor and obtained permission for an interview. Then he tucked her in the back seat, told her not to talk, and drove back silently through the country lanes. Mother Hubbard was grateful for that silence. She was so tired of trying to keep the tears out of her voice.

The Press descended on Long Row as soon as the huc and cry began. Breezy young men on motor bikes with oil-stained waterproofs, who called Mother Hubbard "Ma," and whipped out their note-books under her nose. She drove them away, and they went to pick up crumbs of information from the police, the pub, and that other mart of gossip, the barber's. After them came our Special Correspondents, lean-faced men, hard smokers, who put up at the Dilnot Arms and played poker all night, waiting for the story to break. They tried to get round Mother Hubbard, but she wouldn't have them inside her kitchen.

One afternoon she had gone to the prison with the Police

Court Missioner, leaving Dave in charge. A knock on the door woke Dave from his daydream. He went to open it with the formula "Not to-day, thank you," on his lips. A stout grizzled man stood there.

"Mother in?" he asked.

"No," he said. "She's out."

"Thank you," said the stranger, "I'll come in and wait."

Rather to his surprise Dave found himself leading the way through the wash-house to the kitchen.

"Mind if I smoke?" asked the stranger, lifting the tails of his overcoat and warming himself at the fire.

"No, sir," said Dave, overwhelmed by this courtesy.

"Will mother be long?"

"Hours and hours. She's gone to the—the prison."

"Good," said the stranger. "When I get to the gates of Paradise, and I am asked what I've done with the great gift of life, I shall say, I waited. I've waited in Shanghai, Tripoli, Algeiras, Sofia, Bloemfontein, Washington, San Remo, Locarno, Geneva. God, how I've waited."

"If you're a reporter, sir," volunteered Dave, "she won't tell you anything."

"That's what they all say, son. But in the end they talk. So this is a miner's kitchen, is it? They're not all as clean as this, are they?"

Dave grinned.

He walked round, admiring the polished oven, the table scoured to a creamy smoothness, the bright red of the scrubbed floor.

"And what's that, son?"

"That's the sett pot."

"I see. A sort of copper?"

"That's where she washes."

And while they talked, the music of Shanghai, Tripoli, Algeiras, Sofia—how did it go?—ran through David's brain. His mind was made up. All at once, the future became clear. He was going to be a reporter. Not one of those motor-bike chaps, but a swell reporter who went to Shanghai. "Mr. Hubbard," the editor would say,

respectfully, "we want a good man at Shanghai. If you care to go we would make it worth your while."

"Why aren't you at school, young man?" the stranger interrupted.

"I've left, sir."

"What are you going to do now you've left?"

"I want to be a reporter, sir."

"Good God!" exclaimed the elderly man. "If I had your youth and your health, do you think I'd be a reporter?"

"Yes, sir," grinned Dave, cheekily.

"I believe you're right," admitted the Special Correspondent. "We grouse and we curse, but we get a front seat at all the shows and a peep at the shoddy props backstage. We don't tell all we know. Bless you, it wouldn't do. But we tell as much as we dare. So you want to witness the crazy pageant? It's a hard life; not much money in it. Still, if it's what you want, go for it bald-headed. You could have done with a year or two more at school. Not too long, or the damned schoolmasters would addle your brains. Parents couldn't afford to leave you at school?"

"No, sir. I was going to stay on and be a teacher. Only there's the lawyer to pay. It'll cost us a thousand pounds."

"Quite likely. But you needn't worry about that. This case is news. You'll understand what 'news' means when you're a reporter. It's a good story in any case, and for the first time in human memory, there isn't a major war going on in this hemisphere. Trouble in China, of course, but Chinks aren't news. A million Chinks died of influenza in Canton alone last year, but it wasn't news. A *crime passionnel* is always news. That means the Sunday papers will be after an exclusive story. (Listen to this carefully. You're an intelligent lad.) They want your brother's own life story, and they'll pay for it."

"Moses can't write," grinned Dave.

"They won't want him to write anything but his signature. They'll write the fruity bedroom stuff."

"Coo," said Dave. "What will they pay?"

"They may offer a hundred pounds."

"Coo," whistled Dave.

"Listen. You mustn't take it. It's worth more. Say *no*, and keep on saying *no*. They'll bid against each other and the price will climb up. Don't accept until one of them offers a thousand pounds."

Dave's head reeled.

"A thousand pounds!" he gasped. "For Moses?"

"Silly, isn't it? Here I've been writing ever since I could hold a pencil. I've been all over the world and seen everything. What is more, I can write. I can make you see—no. I can even make you smell the stews of Tangier, and feel the prickly heat of Aden, and the most I've ever got for an article is a hundred pounds. So if you want to earn money with your pen, swim the Channel, fly to the North Pole, run off with the Wimbledon championship, do any damn fool thing you can think of, but don't trouble to write."

Then he beamed on Dave like a benevolent ogre, patted his head, and went out to have a drink.

"Rum kid," he said to himself. "I must have been like that once. Christ! What a long time ago."

Mrs. Hubbard didn't believe the story which Dave blurted out as soon as she got home. She knew that Moses had only written three letters home in the last eighteen months, and two small pages were his limit. That a newspaper would write his story for him and then pay him for it was still more unbelievable. Yet the Police Court Missioner thought it was quite likely. Nothing ever astonished him. But he didn't say the story would have its value because, more likely than not, it would be the last words from the condemned cell.

"Try it," he urged, "if you get the chance. They'll pick up the facts, and Moses can sign. You *must* get him to sign. That's the only chance you'll have of getting the money to fight the case properly."

"I canna do it," she protested. "Washing our dirty clouts in public."

"That's the idea," he agreed. "Keep saying that until they stick up the price. David, you'd better stand by when these newspaper fellows come. See that Mother doesn't say 'snap' too soon. Now, if you'll excuse me, Ma, I'll run along and get my work done."

He patted her on the back while he was lighting yet another cigarette, winked at Dave, and was gone.

Dave lost no time in starting his career. He went next day to call on Mr. Hodder, the jobbing printer who was also the proprietor of the Northedge and District Advertiser, which was incorporated with numerous other journals now defunct. Mr. Hodder came out, scratching his bald head and said he didn't want a boy just at present, but he'd make a note of his name and address.

"Dave Hubbard," said the young hopeful.

"David Hubbard," repeated Mr. Hodder. "Er—any relation to the—er—Hubbard?"

"My brother," said David, with a certain pride. "And the address is 42, Top Long Row."

"Right. I'll bear it in mind. That's the way out." And Mr. Hodder shambled through the door of the outer office into the reporter's room.

"Boy come for a job," he confided to the journalist, who was editor, sub-editor, special correspondent, and local reporter all rolled into one. "Brother of that fellow who did the murder. You know, Hubbard."

"What a stroke of luck," exclaimed the editor, rubbing his hands. "Let him work in here."

"You don't suppose I've given him a job, do you? He'd want five shillings a week and what could he do?"

"Do? Why, he'd give us the very latest news of the murder case. That's what he'd do. All his blasted family have got mouths like rat traps. Won't give anything away. Waiting for the London papers to make it worth their while, I dessay. And here's a chance to pump him and get the biggest scoop of the Advertiser's life, and you send him away. Send somebody after him."

"Mr. Rogers, am I running this paper, or are you?"

The reporter flushed up to the roots of his ears, slammed

the cover of his typewriter, walked to the hat-rack and reached for his scarf.

"Don't be so hasty, mester," said Mr. Hodder anxiously, "I'll send after him. We can do with a lad while things are busy."

That was how Dave made his entry into journalism. He was employed as Printer's Devil, and divided his time equally between the Printing shop and Mr. Rogers' office. The printers, both of them, set to work to take him down a peg. They sent him to the corner shop to buy a packet of Mother's Last Words, and being a pushing young man, he asked out of his turn while the shop was full. He ran out pursued by yelps of laughter, and devised lingering deaths for the two printers. Mr. Rogers was more helpful. He was a shrewd old boy who had been brought down to a small local paper by the many amalgamations of larger provincial journals.

"I'm a back number, my boy," he confessed. "I write. And newspapers don't want writers now. Just pictures and captions."

Pictures? The London paper that was going to bid for his brother's life story would want pictures. He began to collect them. There was one in the Portrait Album which stood with the Family Bible on the cupboard. Moses as a baby, swimming on the hearth-rug. Another hung on the bedroom wall. Moses as one of a class of boys at the British School, arms folded, chin stuck out, glowering and hating his stiff Sunday collar. Moses on a pedestal mount concealed in the outsize uniform supplied to an Army Recruit, a self-conscious grin on his face. Then, put away somewhere, was a wedding group. Moses, still in uniform, held captive by his bride against a background of buxom in-laws. That was about all. The family wasn't one for photographs.

The old special correspondent (Dave never learned his name) was right. The Sunday Press competed for Moses' personal story, and Mother Hubbard drove a hard bargain, and undertook that Moses should sign the articles when required to do so, and that the exclusive right of publication

should be vested in the Sunday Moon. The paper then assumed a proprietorial interest in the case, and could not do too much for Mother Hubbard in the busy days which followed.

Mother Hubbard slept badly, tossing on the big bed, and imagining her Moses in his clammy cell. Her men slept as they always slept—like logs. Men were like that. They made trouble—and then fed as if nothing had happened, and fell asleep like children. And that's what they were—children—up to the neck in muck and mischief. And first mothers and then wives, had to clean them, feed them, and comfort them so that they'd be strong again in the morning to accomplish some new folly. That was the trouble with men. They never grew up.

Even the side of Law and order hadn't grown up. The bobbies, stiff wooden figures, the spitten image of those wooden toys in Mr. Baxter's fancy shop, the lawyers gravely playing a game of their own, old Eli explaining that "it mun be done in a proper form," still thinking of it as a game although his firstborn was on the rack. For the thousandth time Mother Hubbard declared to herself that she'd no patience with menfolk.

The grey dawn nosed its way past the flapping blind, and Mother Hubbard creaked wearily out of bed. It was a relief to be up and doing. The same old routine. Food. Food. She'd prepared food for a whole army in her day. Buying food, cooking food, watching food disappear. And what was at the end of it all? Just a pile of greasy pots, and already another meal in sight. World without end. Amen.

That first miraculous cup of tea revived her. She forced herself to eat a bacon sandwich. Then she toasted a bit of bread and dipped it in the frying-pan between mouthfuls. That went down better. She had a stiff day before her and she had to keep her wits about her. If she wasn't feeling up to the knocker, all this talk went in at one ear and out at the other. For two pins she might drop off in the lawyer's armchair. That would never do. It all depended on her, for Eli shirked things. He'd seen the

lawyer once, once only, and sat mumchance as if he hadn't a tongue in his head. He could lay down the law at the Club, but put him among his betters and he was as dumb as a dog. He couldn't afford the time to go again. He bolted underground—like a scared rabbit. Oh, well, she'd better get them out of bed.

So the days went by. She was so tired she could hardly tell whether she was asleep or awake. But her spirit kept her going.

The day of the trial came. She drove with the Police Court Missioner through a drizzle to the Guildhall where the Assizes were being held. She wore her black skirt and black velvet cape and bonnet on which the sequins danced, but at the last minute she had revolted against this funereal garb and had put on a cream blouse. Very little of it could be seen, but it helped her to know she was not in mourning. Eli sat on the back seat of the little car, stiff in his Sunday serge and wearing a borrowed bowler which he hated. This hatred helped him, just as her cream blouse helped her.

Mother Hubbard never remembered the events of that day consecutively. Certain little scenes were etched sharply on her memory. Stray phrases from the spate of words in which she was involved came to her afterwards. But much of it was blurred. Passages, waiting-rooms, staring crowds, discoloured walls, bits of ceiling plaster peeling, the smell of damp clothes. Men in gowns and funny wigs. Her little solicitor was at her elbow—a dried-up pea of a man.

"That's the Counsel for the Crown," he whispered, "talking to our counsel."

Mother Hubbard saw a dark-jowled man, grinning at the gentleman who was going to defend her Moses. No need for him to smile back. This wasn't a laughing matter. They were paying him more than a lifetime's savings to fight, not to smile at that cold-faced villain. She managed to whisper some of this to Eli.

"Nay, lass," he explained. "It's alike the captains shaking 'ands afore the kick-off. It means nowt. They'll

soon be tapping ankles, and doing a neat foul on each other."

"This isna a game, Eli."

"Nay, it isna. But it mun be done in a proper form."

Mother Hubbard's eyes were glued on the panelled box they said was the Dock. She had vague recollections of being jerked to her feet when the Judge entered and of voices, some high-pitched, others deep and booming, echoing away along all the corridors, and suddenly Moses was there. Her heart went out to him. She willed him to turn in her direction. "We're here, Moses. We're with you," she tried to telegraph to him.

He slowly turned his head in their direction. Mother Hubbard half-rose from her seat. He saw her and gave her a wan smile. Old Eli swallowed hard. The wheels of Justice began to revolve.

It wasn't nearly so impressive as a good Prayer Meeting. The oath was taken casually, barristers lounged. The opening exchanges were delivered in a conversational tone. The Counsel for the Prosecution was speaking. The accused. That meant Moses. What was he saying? Lost the affections of his wife— Took the law into his own hands—killed him. She wanted to interrupt his suave recital, to shout him down. He wasn't being fair. Almost disdainfully he outlined his case.

Procession of witnesses. The milkman who found the body, the police who had arrived on the scene just afterwards, the police who had arrested Moses at Stockport, and then the expert witness, describing the injuries found on the body. Fracture of the back of the skull, broken neck, bruises on the throat.

The atmosphere had grown electric. Hubbard's counsel rose to cross-examine. His fingers played on the edge of his gown.

"The injuries might have been caused by a fall from the roof?"

"Some of them."

"The fracture of the skull?"

"Possibly."

"The broken neck?"

"Possibly."

"But not the bruises on the throat?"

"No."

"Would you consider the bruises on the throat the cause of death?"

"No. Not by themselves."

"The bruises could have been made after death had occurred?"

"It is improbable."

"Will you please answer the question?"

"I am doing my best. In my experience—"

"Your experience is not in question, Sir Walter. Could the bruises on the throat have been made after death had actually occurred?"

The wrangle went on. The police were recalled, and the position of the body established by measurements, and a diagram which was passed up to the Jury.

Mother Hubbard was impatient when, with a suave "By yr leave, m'Lud," an elaborate legal argument was started. All about the rules of the game, like cricket which was one long wrangle. Men loved to argue about the rules of the game. While they argued her lad was on the rack.

More witnesses. Aggie, in a close-fitting helmet of a hat. Cloche, they called them. Saying "d'you see" to the Judge, as if he couldn't see what she was straight away. But she didn't give Moses away. She hadn't seen the fight, or if she had, she was saying nowt.

Then everybody sighed "Ah!" when Moses went into the witness-box. He answered questions in a leaden voice. Yes, he knew his marriage was a failure. No, he'd no idea she was carrying on with other men. He'd gone home hoping things would be all right again. He heard a sound upstairs and dashed upstairs to look. The window was open, and on the roof below he could see a man's figure. He dashed downstairs and out in the yard to cut him off. He caught him as he fell from the roof and they struggled. Then he let go and the man fell heavily. That was all.

"You didn't care whether she was 'carrying on' or not?"

Be careful, Moses, many a man has hanged himself by a careless answer.

"That's not true."

"In a small village where everybody knows everybody's business, surely someone warned you?"

"No, sir."

"Did nobody write to you?"

He hesitated, wary at last.

"We're not a letter-writing lot at Northedge."

"Will you please answer the question. I will make it quite simple. Did you receive any letters from Northedge while you were serving in the Army?"

"Oh yes, sir."

"From your wife?"

"Two or three."

"Only two or three? The fact that you only received two or three did not arouse your suspicions?"

"She's not a letter writer."

"So you got your news of home from some other source?"

"Yes, sir. My mother and father wrote sometimes. My young brothers wrote mostly."

"They didn't tell you how your wife was spending her leisure?"

"They're too young to understand."

"Your mother, now. Did she write to warn you?"

Again that hesitancy. My boy, why didn't the Lord give you Dave's brains?

"No, sir."

"Now, take your mind back to the day of the tragedy. When you returned from service in the Army, you went straight to your parents' home?"

"Yes, sir."

"What hour would that be?"

"Three o'clock."

"You came in by train?"

"Yes, sir."

"How far is it from the station to your parents' home?"

"About a quarter of a mile."

"Did you meet anyone you know in walking that quarter of a mile?"

"One or two."

"Did they speak to you?"

"We passed the time o't day."

"No hint that anything was wrong at home?"

"No, sir."

"How long did you stay at your parents' house?"

"Till nine,abouts."

"And all this time you were panting to go to the wife you had not seen for months?"

"There was no hurry."

"Were you waiting until night had fallen, so that you could catch your wife 'in the act'?"

"No, it nivver entered my head."

"When you were at home with your parents, did they warn you?"

"No."

And the grilling went on, tempting the boy to say he knew and went with murder in his heart. He was, God help him, too stupid to see the traps they laid, but he was honest and his story couldn't be shaken because it was true. So far, at least.

Then they were probing into the struggle in the back-yard. He had caught Luke Fiddler as he fell from the roof. How had he caught him? By the throat? Why did he take him by the throat? Did he mean to kill? Did he ask the gentlemen of the Jury to believe that he caught this man who had violated his home by the throat in an effort to save him from falling? Then what on earth did he mean? He just 'saw red.' For a second.

At last Moses was allowed to step down. His counsel sighed. He ought not to have called him, a bone-head like that. But the prosecution would have insinuated he was afraid to face cross-examination. No. It couldn't be helped. He had to be called. There was still a chance.

Mother Hubbard was in the box now. The Judge spoke kindly to her to put her at ease. As if she could feel

at ease. Even the horrible man who was trying to get Moses hanged was kind. Kindness cost nothing, and she knew what he was after. The questions proceeded. Easy, conversational questions like the minister being pleasant when he dropped in for a cup of tea. Yes, Moses came back late at night. Why did she tell the Police that he had not? The Police wanted to know too much. Did he appear upset? Struck dumb, as you might say. I could hardly rouse him. Yes, I made him go up to the Moor and hide himself. Why did you persuade him to flee from Justice when he was only involved in an accident? I didn't know it was an accident—for sure. Not just then, I mean. Now, be careful, Mrs. Hubbard. Remember you're on your oath.

He was my son. Don't you understand? He was my son. The police would twist and turn everything he said. I was frightened. I couldn't think of anything else except to get him away. Thank you. That is all.

A break at last. A bite and a sup, though she couldn't eat. The food stuck in her throat, though she was glad of a cup of tea.

"Well done, lass," said Eli, his wet moustache coming up from his cup. "You spoke up reight and proper."

"Somebody's got to speak up. The Lawyer isna helping much wi' his 'My learned friend.' He's a sight too friendly. We're non paying him to be friendly."

"It's nobbut a way of speaking. Like 'Your obedient servant' in a Government letter. It means nowt. And it's been all fair and above board so far."

"You mean they'll hang him fair?"

"Nay, lass. They won't hang him. An owd sojer wi' a wound stripe? Not they. Not for a strumpet's fancy man."

"But thee heard what the Judge said about the Law?"

"Law be dommed. The Law don't count when a fellow comes after a man's wife. That's between man and man and it's nowt to do wi' lawyers."

The court was packed to suffocation. Women in fur coats, fashionable harlots, scenting blood, staring at Moses,

stripping him with their hard eyes. The rustle of conversation died. Now there was an air of tension. The play was mounting to its climax. The Prosecution was addressing the Jury, easily and familiarly as a man of the world to twelve others. A simple case. Stripped of its fustian, what was it? Just an ordinary murder. A jealous husband, taking the Law into his own hands. A brutal murder.

Their Counsel was speaking now, addressing the men of the Jury as family men, men who could go home at night secure in the knowledge that their wives were faithful, their hearths inviolate.

A few short weeks ago the accused was a man like them. Serving his country overseas, he looked forward to returning to his wife and his home. The Prosecution had endeavoured to prove that his home life was unhappy. There were tiffs. You have seen the contracting parties to this hasty war marriage, followed immediately by separation, and as men of the world you know that such separation throws a strain on marriage. Patience is not a virtue in which young ardent folk excel. Whatever the tiffs, the accused came home like a bridegroom. The Prosecution made great play with the fact that the accused went to his parents' home first and stayed there for six hours before leaving for his own home. Was it unnatural for a dutiful son to call on his mother on his way from the station—a stone's throw away? Was it unnatural for the hours to slip by quickly in such congenial surroundings when he had so much to tell and the stories of half-a-dozen members of his own family to hear? Does nine o'clock seem so desperately late when he expected to spend the whole night with his wife? Wasn't it perhaps natural that a young man in his hot blood would prefer to wait for the night? There is not a shred of evidence that the accused had heard one word of his wife's frailty. Had there been any evidence no doubt the Prosecution would have produced it. Without that they must believe the testimony of the accused that he knew nothing.

There can be no murder without intent. It is for the Prosecution to prove intent.

Mrs. Hubbard studied the Jury anxiously. Sensual faces, alert faces, anxious faces, important faces. There was one sympathetic face decorated with horn-rimmed spectacles. That was the face of a good man and a kind man, she was sure. She prayed that he would fight for Moses. If he stood out, alone, he could save her lad.

And now the Judge was addressing the Jury. The kind man in the horn-rimmed glasses cocked his head on one side and nodded as the Judge made his points. The rest of the twelve stared at him and tried to concentrate.

The quiet, inflexible voice went on. The Accused. The Prisoner. That was Moses, her first-born. She thought of the big bed at home, of pain unbelievable, of Mrs. Adler giving her a suck from her bottle, and then falling, falling through space, the blackness of oblivion closing over her. All that pain in bearing him, and now these men were ready to snuff out his life. Going over all the evidence again.

Their barrister was leaning back, studying the peeling ceiling, Counsel for the Crown tapping his teeth with a gold pencil, wondering how long the Old Man was going to do his act. The lean, long fingers of the Judge interlocked.

"You must satisfy yourself that there was intent to kill. . . . Premeditation does not necessarily mean having made up the mind long in advance. A man, returning home to his wife, may have no thoughts of murder in his heart. He may, indeed, have been returning with joy. But if he learns on the threshold that his wife has been unfaithful to him, his love can change to hate in the twinkling of an eye. He may not have learned the name of the man who has despoiled his home, but if he resolves there and then, even under the stress of a deep and indeed natural emotion, to 'do the fellow in,' then there is intent to kill. It need not be a cold-blooded, calculated premeditation. It can be as swift as thought itself so long as the intention to kill was there before the blow was struck.

"You have heard the words *crime passionel* many times in this case. Pronounced with the public school accent of my learned friend they may have fallen on your ears with a

certain charm. I wish you to forget them. I instruct you to forget them. This is a British Court of Law, and British Jurisprudence has never recognised a *crime passionnel*. Murder is murder, whether it is done for the sake of a woman or for some less romantic reason. It would be the end of civilization if each one of us could take the law into his own hands . . .

"You have heard a great deal about provocation, and you have been told, quite properly, that provocation cannot render homicide justifiable, but it may reduce it from murder to manslaughter, which is the felonious killing of another without malice. To have this effect, the provocation must be very great. So great, indeed, as to deprive a reasonable man of his powers of self-control. If you find that the shock of discovering his wife in adultery was so great that it deprived the accused of his self-control to such an extent that he did not know what he was doing, then you will bring in a verdict of manslaughter.

"If you find that the accused had the intention of killing, for however short a period, before the fatal blow was struck, then you will bring in a verdict of wilful murder.

"Gentlemen of the Jury, consider your verdict."

Endless waiting. Excited chatter. Endless agonising waiting while the Jury sat behind closed doors. The Court, that solemn machine, broke up and dissolved into its components. The majesty of the Judge was now a tired, little man, anxious to pull off his wig. The reverberating barristers had run their race and were now grown-up schoolboys, all pretence of strife put aside, making tentative arrangements for another feud on the links to-morrow. People drifting out into the corridors and drifting back again, afraid of missing the kill. The black cap. The solemn voice chanting—How did it go? "To be taken to the place from whence you came and there to be hanged by the neck . . ."

"Cup of tea, Ma? Let's slip out for a minute."

"It'd choke me."

The dried-up solicitor was at her elbow now. He seemed to have been speaking some time.

"Very fair summing-up, Mrs. Hubbard. Every chance. Although, of course, we can never depend on Juries. They're taking a long time. That's not a bad sign."

He rubbed his bloodless hands together.

"If I may venture to offer my professional advice, Mrs. Hubbard, I should suggest a cup of hot tea."

"Nay," said Mother Hubbard, "I bide where I am."

She scented a conspiracy to get her out of the way while the dread sentence was pronounced.

More waiting. The Court room was half empty now. The minute hand of the big clock crept round. Mother Hubbard felt sick, but she sat with her eyes glued on the door through which the jurors had disappeared, trying to see through the panels. Somebody inside there was fighting for Moses. The man with the horn-rimmed glasses, who'd looked so kindly at her when she was floundering in the witness-box? Please God make him stubborn. Some of the hard-faced men wanted a hanging. She could read it in their eyes. They would take a commonsense view. "We can't have this sort of thing in England. It's not civilized. Perhaps the fellow got what he deserved, but that's not the point. If every Tom, Dick and Harry takes the law into his own hands, where is it going to end? Russia . . ." Mother Hubbard hoped Russia wouldn't crop up. Nobody was quite sane about Russia in 1919.

They'd browbeat the man in glasses. They'd hustle him. "We can't stay here all night. Everybody's convinced but you. Trying to be different, aren't you? What the Judge said isn't good enough for you. We mustn't shrink from our duty. We must not shrink. We can recommend mercy. A strong recommendation for mercy because he's got a wound stripe. Perhaps you'd agree to that?"

Mother Hubbard guessed all this or saw it with a sort of clairvoyance.

"My God," groaned the Counsel for the Crown, who had just returned. "Still at it."

The solicitor was at her elbow again.

"He is annoyed," he whispered. "I told you it was a good sign when they took a long time."

Time drifted on.

Mother Hubbard pulled herself together. The Court room was filling up again. The Judge was entering, and everybody stood up. A great rustling and coughing and then an intense silence, as the Jury filed back into its box. Their faces gave nothing away.

"Are you agreed on your verdict?"

"We are, my lord."

"On the charge of wilful murder, is the prisoner guilty or not guilty?"

"Not guilty, my lord."

Drums beat in Mother Hubbard's brain. She heard bells pealing and Top Chapel Choir bursting into the Hallelujah Chorus. The room swam round. Then she slid into a heap on the floor.

CHAPTER XIV

MOSES went "down the line" to serve his sentence of three years for manslaughter. The Slaters had left Northedge, taking Aggie with them. When the nine days wonder of the trial was over, the village settled down to its football, its pigeons and its whippets.

The Hubbards set to work to pay off the debts they had incurred. They'd never owed money before, and they weren't going to owe it very long now. Enoch returned to the Pit, and John began reducing the Working Men's Club accounts to law and order. He had a tidy soul, and liked to see long columns of figures marshalled between straight, red lines.

When these had been induced to balance, he called a Committee Meeting. He called it for 7.30, but a quorum was not obtained until 8. Then the Billiard Room was in use, and a game of billiards represented revenue and must not be disturbed. By 8.30 the members were seated round

the green baize, with the Balance Sheet, very handsome with its red ink, spread out in bulk. The chairman tilted his cap back, and said, "Gentlemen. The Minutes." John opened the big black book and read rapidly in his resonant voice. Aaron Prosser immediately went to sleep and wheezed a few "Noises off" as the resolutions and amendments and substantive resolutions were reeled off.

"'Moved by Eli Hubbard,' read John quickly and in a colourless monotone, "'and seconded by Abraham Jake that the committee do now have a drink. Carried *nem. con.* Moved by . . .'"

"Eh oop," interrupted the chairman. "Read yon again."

"'That the committee do now have a drink.'"

"So that's what you do when your cheerman's on t'late shift. Wheer did your drink come from? I'll tell thee, Eli Hubbard and you, Abraham Jake. Out of the blood and sweat of better men than thee who've built this club up brick by brick out of nowt. And you come along and swill the profits the minute my back's turned. I'll non sign that minute until you've paid for that drink."

Shamefacedly, the erring members threw their coppers on the green baize.

They went on to the Balance Sheet. Two other members were sleeping now, but the chairman was wide awake.

"'Receipts,' read John. 'From the sale of Intoxicating Liquors, £1,280 13s. 4d. From the use of baths—4d.'"

"Them baths was a mistake," muttered Caleb Winthrop.

"Who the nation wants to catch his death o' cowl going out in the night air after a bath?"

"What we want," said John, "are pithead baths, so that a man can go home clean."

"What's a bit o' dirt, lad? And there's no place like his own fireside for a miner to wesh him."

"Before wimmin and childer?"

"If there's owt they don't want to see, they can go outside."

"Besides," declared Eli, clinching the argument, "if a

man weses him at t'pit head, who's to gie his back a bit of a rub? "

"Order," called the chairman. "Pit-head baths is out of order."

"So's ours," retorted Caleb. "Plug's broke."

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" appealed the chairman. "This is a business meeting."

And the meeting got down to business and passed the Balance Sheet. Then they discussed a change of beer. Barleycorn's offered a discount of twenty per cent., but their brew lacked body. Whereas Hamville's was a full and satisfactory nut-brown but the discount was only fifteen per cent.

Aaron woke up at the mention of beer.

"You canna get red-neck nowadays," he wheezed. "Red-neck was a man's brew. The stuff nowadays is nowt but hop-bitters."

"We shan't see red-neck any more in *our* time. The question is, gentlemen, Barleycorn with 20 per cent. off or Hamville with 15 per cent. off."

"Wait and see what they gi'e us for Christmas. I tould t'traveller 'Mine's a goose.' "

"Hamville's only give drinks all round."

"Stick out for a goose. Tha'll get it."

And so the club business was transacted. Shrewdly, venally, with an eye to the main chance, and a very real independence. To have built a club at all was a feat. And many were by no means satisfied with the club as it was. They wanted lectures, a library, concerts, lawns, and most urgent of all, a brass band.

John found much more than the honorarium to attract him. He planned to open a Sunday afternoon class in Industrial History.

Dave was busy becoming a journalist. He didn't like the Printing Shop. Two jobbing printers solemnly running their "Chapel" seemed ridiculous to him. He didn't like their snuff, and, in the war which has raged since the days of Caxton, he took the editorial side against the Printers—the artists' against the craftsmen's. They, poor

fools, thought setting up a story in type was bigger stuff than writing it out of one's own head. Who played the organ? The man at the keyboard, or the fellow who blew the bellows?

"What sort of a tune would you get," they asked, "if the bellows blower went on strike?"

That was their attitude. Strike and stop the printing of works of genius. Blackmail, he called it. He spent every spare minute with Old Rogers, until the boss came along and yanked him back to the composing room to sort out the "pie."

The paper specialised in Births, Marriages and Deaths, wife beatings and other manly sports. There was, of course, a column headed "A chiel's amang ye takkin' notes," some "Hints for the Housewife," which came from London with the type blocked out in a sort of cardboard, and a feature called "Northedge Fifty Years Ago," which reproduced the exciting news from the old files just half a century back. For this organ of public opinion, David intended to write literature.

He was not asked to write literature, but to go round the barbers' shops, gather news and verify it. At this period of his career he was as close-cropped as a convict, for he was too nervous to announce he had only come for news. Another job which he loathed was to visit each widow in the village on the anniversary of her husband's death, and point out how nice it would be to put a notice in the 'In Memoriam' column. Prose, half-a-crown for three lines; Verse, a shilling extra. He was often asked to put it into verse. Something about "His empty chair" and "not forgotten."

Then Rogers promoted him to Funerals, because a cub reporter had nine lives, and a liver chill more-or-less would mean nothing to him. They gave David cold shivers down the spine. The pitiless words of the burial service. The dull, irrevocable thud of earth on the coffin. Women with faces broken with weeping. Forlorn children. The seedy black of the undertakers' men. The solemn procession to the cemetery. The almost gay bustle of the return, and

then the funeral ham tea with the bereaved talking at the top of their voices, gusts of hilarity mingling with pious memories of the deceased—a desperate effort to escape from the shadow of death.

Dave felt all this but he didn't consider putting it into words. The stuff he turned in began: "On Tuesday last all that was mortal of our respected fellow-citizen, Mr. John Morgan, of 37, Slade Lane, was interred at the New Cemetery by the Rev. W. Griffiths-Jones, B.D. The funeral arrangements were in the capable hands of Messrs. Dawkins and Hibbert."

Mr. Rogers looked under his eye-glasses and read it.

"Splendid," he said, "that's the tripe we want. You stick to that style. It's lush. It's redundant. It's a mess of clichés. But it's what the public wants. We had a military funeral here during the war, and, believe me, the military know how to put on a show. A slow march with every man in step, arms reversed, *The Dead March in Saul*, the drums, the Union Jack draped over the coffin, the firing squad, and then that Last Post. It made me squawk like a kid. I put that on paper. I got the creak of the gun-carriage in it even. The best thing I ever did. Did I print it? For Northedge to snigger over? Not likely. I just turned out the Funeral Mixture as Before and went to have a drink."

Dave learned shorthand and attended night-school to that end. He never became really proficient, but he had a good memory and a better imagination, so he was never at a loss in reporting local orators. Indeed, Northedge orators nearly always played the same record, and Dave knew their speeches better than they did themselves. After a League of Nations Union Meeting, Dave became international-minded, and he wrote a long, wordy article on the subject and placed it on Mr. Rogers's desk.

The old man ran his eye rapidly over it, smiled, and handed it back to Dave.

"Very nice, but we can't print it."

"If Councillor Bindle said anything half so good, you'd splash it on the front page."

"Naturally, my boy," cried Rogers, rubbing his hands. "Northedge doesn't want to know what you think. But it does want to know what Councillor Bindle thinks. Councillor Bindle is news."

"He's one of your best advertisers," retorted Dave.

"My son," grinned the old man, "I knew we should make a journalist of you."

So whenever Dave had a bright thought he longed to give the world, it duly appeared in the Advertiser in the middle of Councillor Bindle's next speech. The Councillor, who had once been reported verbatim by Rogers with every—er and—um included, and every aspirate left out, congratulated Mr. Hodder on his new reporter. In the course of a long life devoted to the public weal, he had never been reported so faithfully. He trusted that the Advertiser would retain his services for many years to come.

"'Appen," said Mr. Hodder, scratching his head, "but the Advertiser can't pay its way on speeches. It wants Ads. Now what about a nice display Ad. of your new summer lingery, like? With a saucy picture, eh?"

Yes, Dave meant to feed Councillor Bindle, but only so long as it suited his book. Councillor Bindle might be useful to him some day. He had a finger in most pies.

There were lots of things to report that year. First there was the Northedge War Memorial, which aroused bitter feelings, sarcastic letters to the paper, and threats of tar and feathers should a certain statue be accepted. The Vicar wanted a Cross to be erected in the Churchyard, but three brands of Methodists, Baptists, Unitarians, Christian Scientists, and the British Israel Movement just stamped on this proposal. Then the Labour Party and the Musical Union joined in an uneasy alliance to espouse the cause of a Public Hall. To hear them argue, every soldier who answered the call had been burning with a desire to speak or sing from the platform of Northedge Municipal Hall. They fought for Democracy. And what did Democracy mean if it didn't mean Free Speech? And how could you get Free Speech without a Public Hall? Or if you were musical, you argued that these lads fought for the finer

things of life—music, for instance. Handel and all that. While the men who had come back, grey with the mud of Passchendaele, smiled grimly and sucked their pipes in peace.

The village would have none of this Public Hall business. It wanted a statue. Or statute—it was never quite clear which. The one famous man Northedge had produced, a sculptor whose work adorned the greatest buildings of London, Chicago, and San Francisco, offered a statue to his native place. The Council handled this offer circumspectly. It looked a good offer, but they'd have to provide a plinth and railings. The sculptor wasn't famous in Northedge. He was just Cracked Tom's lad. They ought to have a photo of the thing.

The photograph came, and the fat was in the fire. It was a statue of a man straining under the weight of a gun, carried like a cross. The steel helmet was tilted back, and the neck muscles stood out with the strain. The heavy feet were embedded in Flanders mud.

"It is a libel on our gallant lads," intoned the Vicar, "I am not sure it is not a mockery of our Deepest Religious Feelings."

"If that is Art," declared the schoolmaster, "then every lad in my school is an artist. Look at his boots, for instance."

"A soldier!" sneered the ex-sergeant. "Why, he's got a button too many in front and a wound stripe in the wrong place. Besides, infantry don't carry guns. It's just daft."

The parents who had lost their sons clung to their illusions. They wanted a statue of their Jim or their Thomas Henry, alert, erect, spick and span, and every inch a soldier. A smile on his face, his shoulders well back and his chest like a pouter pigeon's. They got what they wanted.

It stands there to this day. Roped off from the Recreation Ground, this product of the Monumental mason's Art mounts sentinel over the children as they play. On his right hand stands a cumbrous grey tank captured from

the enemy. Behind him are the public seats where the old standards, and the men "on compo" come to sun themselves and discuss infallible remedies for the rheumatics. It is a part of Northedge, accepted and forgotten.

Then there was the question of a suitable celebration of the Peace. The Labour Party said (quite truly) that there were twenty-three wars raging at that moment, so how could they celebrate Peace when there was no peace? The Party was promptly accused of trying to deprive the little children of their oranges and their bags of nuts, and the old age pensioners of their cup of tea or a pipe of 'bacca. In the Town Meeting passion ran high. Wild and expensive plans were formulated for a Military Tattoo, an All-England Brass Band Competition and a Historical Pageant, although Northedge had no history to parade. The Chairman of the Finance Committee was shocked. Had the Meeting considered the cost?

"Make the Jarmans pay," roared the Meeting.

But the Meeting was sobered and got down to brass tacks.

Aaron Prosser rose unsteadily to his feet and cleared his throat.

"Mester Cheerman, ladies and gents. What we want is a proper celebration. I move we ha'e a knife-and-fork tea."

And that is what they had.

"A good time," wrote Dave in a phrase that Bloomsbury gleefully annexed, "was had by all."

It was a curious, unreal celebration. The end of the war was far back in the fogs of November, 1918. All sense of relief from tension had gone. The new year had brought its own troubles. The past was buried with its dead. Let them rest in peace. And there was no feeling of the dawn of a new age: Talk in plenty of the League of Nations, but Northedge was too shrewd to be taken in by talk. Too many parsons and politicians on the platform. All kiss-my-hand and compliments. What interested Northedge was coal, and whether it should be loaded with fork or shovel. For it made a world of difference to the pay-ticket which implement was used.

The Pictures taught Northedge a lot. The young men aped the husky manners of the screen lovers. Instead of that awkward shyness which prevented a man and a maid walking side by side, they treated 'em rough. And the girls learned, too. They learned how to walk and wear their clothes, and they looked up at the young men through fluttering eyelashes.

The girls smoked—not in public—but they smoked. And they refused to stay at home when their lords and masters went abroad. They even ventured into public houses and were persuaded to have a glass of Port wine which everybody knew was teetotal really. They rode pillion on the back of motor-bikes, and they used the smart, regular bus services to go to town every Saturday. They even went to football matches, and soon became so fiercely partisan that they screamed, “Kick his guts out” and shocked their men folk who drew the line at a sliding tackle or a nice bit of ankle tapping.

Women had come into their own. They married young, as they had always married. They weren't “caught” so often on the Moor. Not that their powers of resistance were stronger than their mothers', but they knew a deal more. And they didn't wait until they could save enough for a few sticks and a satisfactorily filled bottom drawer. They paid one instalment down and possessed at once a complete home of shiny new furniture, so new that the wood was green under the sticky varnish. And they wouldn't get up to see their husbands off to the early shift.

“It seems to me, John Henry,” as old Eli said over his quart at the Red Lion, “as it wasna us as won this war. And it wasna t'Jarmans neither. It was the wimmin.”

Yet his women tasted very little of the fruits of victory. Mother Hubbard spent her days much as she had done before she was emancipated. She seldom went out now. She had done enough gadding about for a life-time, and she got more exercise than she needed padding between the stove and the sink. Her figure had grown heavy now, and her legs and ankles were swollen. The rather grim lines on her face had deepened.

The freedom Hilda had won was taken as a matter of course. She was freed from the monstrous upholstery, the trailing skirts and the whalebone buttresses of the previous generation. But she was still confined within the code of her elders, a rigid code preached in the chapels and enforced in the home. The men might, and did, break out. The monotony of toil in dull, grey surroundings made such an outbreak inevitable. But it was denied to women. They were either respectable or whores of Babylon. They were not allowed to sin and repent.

Hilda put her hair up and went to the mill as her mother had done, only she had gone in clogs and shawl while her daughter went neat in her second best and put on a gay overall in the machine room. She had outgrown her coltish untidiness, and she dressed as the Pictures and Butterick's fashions taught her to dress. All the younger girls tried to look as like as peas, but Hilda's flaming hair and glorious vitality marked her out from the ruck.

Men were scarce in the mill. Just the engineer and his mate who crept under the intricate knitting machines and did wonderful things with a spanner, used as a third hand.

"Doing anything to-night, kid?" he would ask Hilda, patting her bottom in a friendly way.

"You keep your hands to yourself, Thomas Henry."

"There's a good Picture at the Palace this week. What about it?"

Hilda liked the Pictures. And she had very little money to spend on them. She remembered Mother Hubbard's advice: "Nivver be beholden to no man." Men never did something for nothing. They wanted their wages sooner or later, and they only wanted One Thing.

"'Purple Passion,'" said the engineer. "'A thrilling picture of Love and Romance, at the Back of Beyond, featuring Nazimova.' Sounds a bit 'ot, don't it?"

"In the fewtils?"

"What's them?"

"F-a-u-t-e-u-i-l-s," spelt Hilda. "You pronounce it 'fewtils'."

"I pronounce it 'ninepenny's.' All right. Where shall I see you?"

"Corner Union Road and South Street. Seven o'clock. 'Sh. Look out. The owd besom's snooping round."

And under the sour glance of the forewoman the work went on.

The air was hot and oppressive. A steady temperature of 80 degrees had to be maintained, and it drugged the senses by the afternoon. Then the buxom wench with the bawdy laugh struck up a hymn tune and they all joined in—humming self-consciously at first and afterwards singing like larks until the noise of the machines was drowned.

The boss came into the workroom about four o'clock. He was only the manager, and the girls kept him in his place. It was a tip-and-run business, this daily inspection. Surrounded by a flood of femininity which sent his blood pressure mounting, longing to tap arms and whisper in those inviting ears, yet condemned to look at the machines, while fifty pairs of remorseless eyes dissected his wardrobe, and criticised his person. "Here's the boss," ran the whisper. "Let's make him blush."

In his office, the boot was on the other leg. He was master there, and any female who penetrated the fortress was just a slave to be "stopped" or given her cards at the whim of the tyrant. Most of the girls were terrified of the office. All but Myra and Hilda. Hilda because she was afraid of nothing, and Myra because she knew all about men. She only had to sit down right under their noses and lean forward a little and their eyes would peer down at her "division," and they forgot all about stoppages and the sack.

The Boss soon noticed Hilda. The aureole of her hair ensnared him. He employed all manner of contrivances to get her into his office. But the Forewoman smelt a rat, and it was always her sturdy, truculent figure which stood in his doorway and said "Well?" And then Hilda played into his hands. She had words with the Forewoman, and, flaming with a sense of injustice, flung words she barely realised she knew, words which scorched and blistered,

and drew even a shocked admiration from the engineer and his mate. Her bosom heaving with indignation, the Forewoman made her way to the office. The baggage must be sacked. The manager promised to speak to the girl.

There was no need to send for her. She was there, a mutinous fury, panting with more home truths she had just remembered.

"I'll deal with her, Mrs. Phelps," cooed the manager. "You needn't stay."

Mrs. Phelps flounced out and slammed the door.

The manager toyed with some papers on his desk while Hilda breathed heavily, waiting for the resumption of battle. At length he looked up.

"You know," he began, trying to look severe, "you shouldn't annoy Mrs. Phelps."

"I—I couldn't help it," blurted out Hilda. "She isn't fair."

What a glorious kid, he thought.

"You should curb that temper of yours, my dear."

She maintained a mutinous silence.

"Mrs. Phelps is a bit tiresome," he admitted, "but she's a good old stick at heart. The firm think a lot of her."

"*We* don't," snapped Hilda.

"Then you must try. You will try, won't you?"

He got up and patted her on the back.

"Aren't you going to sack me?" she blurted out.

"Sack you?" he replied. "The best-looking lass in the mill?"

"Thank you, Mr. Browning," she said formally, "I'll try not to lose my temper."

Then when she had scampered down the passage, he steeled himself for a scene with Mrs. Phelps.

As Mrs. Phelps was adamant and flung her resignation in his teeth, the manager removed Hilda to the packing department. This satisfied Mrs. Phelps' honour, and at the same time brought Hilda next to the office. The manager became very fussy about the packing arrangements. He liked to stand behind Hilda, watching her deft fingers arrange the gleaming black stockings in their cardboard

cases. He noticed her shoes were lop-sided and her skirt sagged at the back. Pity, because she'd dress up. He patted her gently when he went away. It was a habit of the Boss, and if a girl worked in the factory she had to put up with it. Once he let his hand slide over her thigh. She turned on him like a wild cat, and boxed his ears. He took her by the shoulders and shook her.

"Lemme go!" she shouted.

"You blasted little fool," he said. "Who wants to hurt you? Where do you think you're going to get while you fly up in the air like that? Why can't you be friends?"

"Friends!" she sneered. "You men only want One Thing."

"And you want lots of things. Nice things. A fur coat, an evening gown, smart shoes—"

She coloured up.

"I can get them without your help."

"It's not so easy, my girl. You'll be a factory lass all your life, and end up like Mrs. Phelps. I'm telling you. Take your chances when they come, and if you believe the things they stuff into you at Sunday School you'll never get out of the ruck."

"Oh, won't I?"

"My dear child, how can you?"

"I'm going on the Halls."

He laughed.

"Honest, I am."

"You're a rum kid. First you're so pure you mustn't be touched, and then you're going on the Halls."

"I can take care of meself."

"I've no doubt you can, love, but you won't get very far in the profession by face-slapping. Most of the ladies have a sleeping partner, you know."

"A lot you know about it."

"Matter of fact, I do. I often go behind. It would open your eyes to see the real thing. Say, why not come with me one night?"

That made her eyes glitter.

"You only want—"

"One Thing," he mocked. "But you needn't be afraid. I won't touch you."

"I dissent."

"Rubbish."

"No missing the last train?"

"I never even thought of it."

"Then don't. Eh, I wish I dare."

"I dare you."

"Could I bring Myra?"

"Good God, this isn't the Factory Summer Outing. It's just you and me. You could tell the good people at home you're going with Myra, if you like."

"It'll be a lie."

"It needn't. You can travel to town with Myra. I'll meet you there, and we'll lose Myra. She won't want us any more than we want her. Shall we say Tuesday?"

Hilda bit her lip, and then nodded.

On Tuesday, she was ushered into a new world. In a plush and gilt saloon, she sipped her first cocktail that seared her throat and brought tears into her eyes. She leaned against the bar (she felt safer that way) and met the slightly insolent gaze of the young men without blushing. In the ten minutes she was there, she saw more money change hands than she had seen in all her young life. Why, a five-pound note was tossed across the room in settlement of a silly bet concerning the winner of the 1913 Derby, tossed as casually as a bit of waste paper.

Then the Stalls at the Empire. She felt infinitely superior to the whistling crowd in the Gallery. She was glad she had put on her best, at the very moment that Mr. Browning was thinking something would have to be done about her outfit. From the Stalls the stage looked different. She could see the next turn hovering in the wings. The make-up on the players' faces was clearly visible, and she was very conscious of the band. In fact, the magic and mystery of the stage had gone. She was close to the machinery, but its fascination was greater than ever.

During a straight turn from a heavy-weight soprano who

had retired from the Operatic Stage, they escaped into the foyer.

"Let's go behind," suggested Browning.

They went outside and down a cobbled alley littered with straw. A big commissioner barred the way.

"Evening, George," sang out Browning.

The Commissioner shook his head sadly. Hilda saw half-a-crown glint in Browning's hand.

"Just whisper my name in Tiny Tim's ear, Sergeant," he suggested.

The coin disappeared in the Commissioner's palm.

"Any friend of Tiny Tim's," he announced, "is welcome. You know the way, sir."

They passed down a corridor with white-washed walls still decorated with the little wire cages which used to protect the gas jets of an earlier age. Call boys raced past them, knocking at doors to warn Turns they were due to go on. Others carried trays of drinks.

"Care to peep at the stage?"

Hilda nodded. She was breathlessly excited. The Stage. There it was, and not a bit as she had imagined it. To the audience the Stage is a neat, box-shaped room, but seen from the wings, it is a lofty barn littered with props and flats, a crazy mess of scaffolding, its ceiling lost in the shadows. She had pictured the players waiting in the wings, hushed, reverently watching the star in the centre of the stage. There was little reverence here. In front of the footlights, the Diva tore her vocal chords to shreds, behind the backcloth, scene-shifters wrestled with the next set, swearing under cover of the band's best efforts. In the wings, barely hidden from the audience, Fanny Yelland, the sand-dance expert, pattered a *pas seul*, the Hackett Twins were tossing dice for half-crowns, and a trio of Jewish child artistes were exchanging very knowledgeable stories with the call boy.

They visited Tiny Tim in his little white-washed cell. He was making-up with a thick yellow ochre paint, some of which had escaped on his collar. Drinks were ordered.

Other troopers kept slipping in and more drinks were called for.

"What do you do to your hair, ducky?" Fanny Yelland asked Hilda. "Don't tell me it's real."

A young man filled her glass and took possession of her.

"You've seen my Act, of course," he began.

"No. Whad you do?" asked Hilda, muzzily.

"That's a good 'un. Asking Bertie Bartram what he does. You're pulling my leg, aren't you? No? Really? Well, you go in front and see my Act. I shall stun 'em. I'm singing three songs, darling. The first's about Mother-in-law. Quite new and a winner. The second's about a policeman, 'I wish I had a Bobby's job,' and the third's about twins. 'One and one make two, Dot and carry one' (bit of business there with a couple of Clarkson babies). That fetches the roof off. Like my suit?"

"It's lovely," admitted Hilda.

"My own design. I've got three of 'em. Wear this blue one for the first number, then I change into a green suit, and give them an eyeful for my third number when I put on my heliotrope. Always wear these three colours. Except in the West End, of course. When I'm on the bill at the Palace I just wear glad rags and a boiled shirt and everybody says 'how refrained.'"

Then Tiny Tim went on, and they returned to the Front of the house to watch. Out into the cool night air, splashed with lights, and wet granite sets and tramlines gleaming under the arc lamps. Supper in a plush and gilt restaurant, where there were young men and hip-swinging girls. Fish and chips, but a different kind of fish and chips from those sold at the corner shop, and strong coffee which cleared the muzziness of her head. She felt Browning's knee against hers, and she thought he was entitled to that much after such a glorious evening.

"Rum kid," he thought, looking at her flushed face and listening to her excited chatter. Then she grew suddenly tired and rather pathetic, as if she didn't know what was coming next.

"Come on," he said. "We mustn't miss our train."

They found Myra on the platform and he handed Hilda over to her.

"Got to see a fellow," he explained, and Hilda knew she was reprieved.

"Had a good time, duckie?" asked Myra.

"Marvellous," breathed Hilda.

"Tastes differ. I shouldn't like him to touch me."

"He hasn't touched me."

"Now that *is* marvellous."

"It's gospel. He hasn't."

"He will next time. You'll see. He's not in the hosiery and lingerie trade for nowt."

Back home again in a silent, shuttered Northedge, her footsteps echoing on the deserted pavements.

The kitchen was warm and frowsty with the smell of drying pit clothes.

"Is that you, Hilda?" called Mother Hubbard, from her bedroom.

"Yes, auntie."

"Drink up your cocoa and come to bed. A nice time to come home."

"Yes, Auntie."

"Lock the door and turn out the gas afore you come up. And don't wake the lads."

Thick treacly cocoa in a mug standing in the hearth. Not to-night. She poured it discreetly down the sink, and rinsed away its traces, for there was no waste in this house.

Suddenly she hated the house. She had always taken it for granted, but now she had other standards by which to measure it. By these it was bare and mean. She ached for the world she had just seen, where five-pound notes were crumpled into balls and tossed across the room like yesterday's newspaper. She wanted lights and laughter, music and the crackle of applause.

"Aren't you *ever* coming to bed?"

"Yes, Auntie," she said meekly.

But her mind was made up. She belonged to that other world where women admired her hair, and men hovered round like moths drawn to a candle. Sometime, somehow

she was going to enter that world. She would conquer that world before she was through. And to get in she would pay whatever price was necessary. Men only wanted One Thing. Well, if they'd get her where she wanted to be, it wasn't much of a price to pay.

CHAPTER XV

MONEY began to get tight. The owners of little businesses sidled into the Bank instead of stepping in briskly and banging a crumpled fist full of notes, silver and cheques on the counter. They eyed the inner door apprehensively, dreading the moment when the cashier would say, 'The manager would like to have a Word with You, sir.' Then the inner door opened and closed behind them, and Mr. Hoskins, genial as ever, shook hands and said it was quite mild for the time of the year.

"Tha didn't fetch me in here, Mester Hoskins, to talk about t'weather," protested George Baxter, one of the victims.

The manager placed the tips of his fingers together, looked up at the ceiling, and mentioned that what he really had in mind was the account. Something ought to be done about it. He wasn't anxious, personally. He had the greatest confidence in Mr. Baxter. It was the Head office.

What happened in the little back office in Northedge Main Street was happening all over the country. The spendthrift days were over. Prices had to come down until a pound note was once more worth a golden sovereign. And the only way to bring prices down was to withdraw those credits which expanded the swollen note circulation.

Theory was vindicated. Prices did begin to fall. And then everybody stopped buying—wholesalers, retailers, and consumers alike waiting for prices to touch bottom. As the women said, it was daft to pay sixpence to-day if you could buy the same thing for fivepence next week.

So the warehouses were not re-stocked, the big shops sold below cost in a panic, and the little shops which hadn't the heart to cut prices, waited grimly for customers who never came. The volume of trade slowed down, manufacturers ordered short time, and combed out their work-people. Day by day, the queues outside the Labour Exchanges lengthened. These offices were meant to cope with a trickle of unemployment, but this was a flood. Hastily Sunday Schools and Co-operative Halls were requisitioned and staffs augmented. Whole towns were on the dole, while politicians up in London solemnly affirmed the advantages of regaining the Gold Standard.

Then the miner felt the pinch. For years he had taken coal for granted. "They mun have coal," was his consolation when belts were tightened in a strike. And, sure enough, when they wanted coal urgently enough, peace in the industry was patched up. But now the sidings were glutted with coal, and nobody wanted it. The silent mills, the factories on half time, the damped furnaces, the households on the dole could not absorb the coal that was won.

It was good house coal they mined at Northedge. Northedge Cobbles could be seen in any London dealer's price list, and the wagons of the Northedge Coal and Iron Co. had been seen by holiday makers as far south as Bournemouth. (But the cobbles, of course, were not seen on the landlady's fire.) Northedge had sufficient orders from the south to keep going for three shifts a week, but nobody got fat on that. Motor-bikes were sold until every garage was full of second-hand machines; pianos and suites of furniture, not quite paid for, went back in the plain vans in which they had come; the fur coats wilted and were not replaced.

Northedge began to look shabby. Mr. Meacham's shop with its great carcasses of red meat, its pile of tripe and its festoons of sausages used to make the mouth water. Now its chopping-block was almost as bare as in war-time. The genial Meacham, whose 'Now you meat buyers' could be heard half-a-mile away, had become a shadow of

his former self—an anxious, wrinkled edition of the Meacham who had carved off steaks with a splendid abandon, flinging the chopper down so that it stood upright, quivering in the block.

All the shops in Main Street looked dusty, and one or two were shuttered and dead. The tradesmen blamed the buses that took their customers away to the town where they were tempted by the cut prices of the chain stores. And the buses had something to do with it. The brightly-lit chariots went out to the tick laden with Northedge folk and Northedge money. The money would be burned in gay new public houses and luscious cinemas where the feet sank into pile carpets, and where the worker and his girl could escape into a world of make believe.

Northedge streets were empty at nights except for the great lorries that rumbled down Main Street on their way from the North. The toll-bar was no longer the meeting-place where colliers sat on their haunches, and discussed the day's affairs. The many public houses were half empty, and the few regulars sat all night over a pint in the Tap Room, and then dragged weary feet through the puddles of streets which could no longer be repaired.

The young men discussed the slump at lodge meetings, in the W.E.A., and in Labour Party rallies. Adventurous youths decided that Northedge was done. They went off to the newer pits Doncaster way where good money was still to be addled. Some of them came back, complaining of the heat of the pits and the Godless ways of the miners in those parts.

Others swore they would give up the pits and go on the land as Ike Severn had done. Four years he had lived and fought above ground and he had no mind to continue the struggle below the surface. In the long watches of the trenches, he and others of his kind, had dreamed of a little place in the country with a cow and a few fowls, perhaps a golden-haired child swinging on the gate. And being men with hands, they had made the dream come true. On inhospitable odds and ends of soil, they had hammered up huts, stretched wire netting, ordered settings

of eggs, "guaranteed pullets," and worked out sums in threepenny eggs which proved what mugs they'd been not to think of this easy road to wealth before.

Others had taken out licences to hawk, and had gone on the roads from one hamlet to another, offering paraffin, pegs, 'seconds' in pots, and all the bits and bobs a country-woman needed. It was a good life, while it lasted, to sit behind the old nag, whistling, basking in the sun, and chaffering with the women who clustered round when the hawker cried his wares. But when the slump came, there wasn't a living in it, and the old nag had to be sold.

Ike hung on grimly in his poultry farm at Moor Side. His hens did not lay threepenny eggs. They waited until the price had slumped to one-and-six a dozen before they did their bit. And his guaranteed pullets developed a tendency to crow. Rats and foxes broke into his pens, and his best birds went down with roup. When his miner friends asked him about setting up in the same line of business, Ike told them to stick to the dole. He worked eighty-four hours a week and got less for it than they got for signing on at the Labour. Ike wasn't beaten, but he was bitter and careworn. The deputation shambled down the hillside to Northedge and resigned itself to the queue outside the Exchange.

John Hubbard scorned these escapists. He was a miner and proud of it. Coal, he declared, could be sold if the pit could be cleansed of its directors, its shareholders, its way-leaves and its royalties. The mine for the miner was his motto. It was heard more and more at the lodge meetings as the creeping paralysis settled on Northedge.

Mr. Hodder, the printer, was feeling the draught too, and had been summoned to meet Mr. Hoskins in the private room at the Bank. He emerged, mopping his bald head. What, as he'd asked Hoskins, could a man do? He couldn't make people read his paper. One might, suggested Mr. Hoskins silkily, cut down expenses, just as if he hadn't been cutting down expenses for years.

Dave was now earning ten shillings a week, and this was handed out to him, coin by coin, as if old Hodder hoped

against hope that Dave would sweep up the coins before the tenth was reluctantly pushed across the counter. A vain hope. Dave pocketed the tenth, but still waited.

"Well?" demanded Hodder.

Dave blurted out that he wanted a rise. He was doing a reporter's work now and he ought to be getting a reporter's pay. He wasn't allowed to develop the argument. The boss blew up and told him to go to Hell. Dave flushed and walked out of the office.

He didn't tell his family he was sacked. His pride was wounded, and he couldn't stand sympathy or friendly advice just then. After a long walk to cool his head, he decided to call on old Rogers.

The editor lived in a little semi-detached villa, indistinguishable from a dozen others in the street, but inside it had an atmosphere of its own. Dave's idea of a parlour was a chilly room, stiff with respectability, and smelling of bees-wax, all the chairs standing to attention against the wall, and a marble clock on the mantelpiece flanked by pot images of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. He hadn't realised that a parlour could be different.

The room he now entered was filled with tobacco smoke, and was magnificently untidy. The sofa was drawn up to the fire and a deep armchair had one foot right in the hearth. Books and newspapers were strewn generously over the table and floor.

"Don't tell me I've got to turn out to-night," began Rogers.

"It's not that, Mr. Rogers," blurted out Dave. "I've got the push."

"Sit down, lad. Have a drink? No, you're teetotal—"

"No. I'm not. Not any longer, Mr. Rogers."

"All right. You've got to begin sometime. But you needn't get blind over a little thing like the sack. If I'd got it, I should be through. But you're just at the beginning of things. So drink this, slowly mind, and tell me all about it."

So Dave sat half-submerged in upholstery, holding a glass of nauseous fluid, and recounted his interview with

Mr. Hodder. And as he sipped, Dave gradually became the dominant personality to which a discomfited Hodder had cringed.

"I showed him I was angry," he concluded. "I slammed the door."

Rogers smiled.

"That's the spirit. Now what are you going to do?"

Dave's courage evaporated.

"If you want to write," decided Rogers sagely, talking as if to himself, "you'll write. Nothing can stop you. But if you want to make money, you won't write. Which do you want to do?"

"I'm going to make money," confessed Dave. "And then I shall buy up Hodders and give the old man the sack to see how he likes it."

"The Arnold Bennett touch. I'll lend you a book about that. Rich old bloke is refused a steak and a glass of beer at a swell hotel, so he goes to see the proprietor, buys the hotel out of hand, and then returns to the dining-room and insists on his steak and beer. Rather magnificent. But you won't be able to do it for years. In the meantime, you've got to live. You wouldn't like me to speak to old Hodder on Monday to see if he'd take you back?"

"No," said Dave, stubbornly.

"I shall miss you. And Hodder may be regretting it already."

Dave shook his head.

"You're right," admitted Rogers. "Never crawl for a job—at least, while you've got youth on your side and no family to tug at your heartstrings. Try the town paper. They may like a Northedge correspondent. Turn in all the stories you can find. You won't get much but you don't get much out of Hodder. And you could help me with my London agencies. At election times and when there's a colliery accident or a coal strike there's quite a lot to be picked up, and sob stuff about pit ponies always goes down well. No League of Nations essays remember. Things you know and things you've seen. And men, not ideas. Don't write about the Nationalisation of the

Coal Mines. That's a job for experts. Write about Herb Smith and his cloth cap."

Dave walked home muzzily, thinking of his glorious future instead of his inglorious past, as wise old Rogers had intended him to do. On Monday he went into Ilson and searched out the office of the Ilson Evening News.

"We get all the Northedge news we require, thank you, Mr.—er—Hubbard," said the Editor.

"You don't print enough to make us buy the paper," Dave pointed out. "We wait for the week-end till our Advertiser comes out."

"It is hardly worth our while—"

"Aren't nine thousand people worth while?" pressed Dave. "They want the racing and football and cricket. They buy the Notts paper for that. But if you offered 'em all the winners as well as the Northedge news, they'd buy your paper instead."

Rather to his own surprise, the proprietor found himself agreeing to pay David Hubbard a penny a line for every item of news sent in and printed.

The slump affected Hilda. With the Hubbards working but three shifts, she was expected to throw all her earnings into the pool, and this made her the more determined to escape to that glittering world of her dreams. Then, as economies even in art silk stockings were practised, the mill went on short time, and a few weeks later Hilda brought home the news that she'd been "stood off." Mother Hubbard nattered at her as if it were her own fault. She never grumbled at her men. It was just bad luck if they fell out of work. Besides, you couldn't expect too much of men. Hilda said she needn't chunter like that because she would soon find a job in Nottingham.

"There's finding," said Mother Hubbard oracularly, "and keeping. And what's the sense of earning good money to spend it all in fares?"

But Hilda had no idea of spending two hours daily of her youth in standing in crowded trains. She had other plans. In fact, Mr. Browning, her boss at the mill, had already found her a job at Mossops in the Square where she

would have to live in. This was an old-established emporium which once catered for the County, but, under more difficult conditions, was now tempting the matrons of the lower middle classes. Mr. Mossop's young ladies were hand-picked as became such a respectable establishment. Even when the popular trade was sought, the standard of service remained high. But there had been one change which Hilda did not think it necessary to advertise. The assistants were no longer compelled to live in. It was no part of Hilda's plans to spend her nights as well as days under the fatherly discipline of Mossop's, and after a fortnight, she invented an aunt of uncertain health who wished her to sleep at her flat. This was the top story of a small house near the Arboretum, discovered for her by the knowledgeable Mr. Browning, and she did not spend all her evenings alone.

Sundays she spent with the Hubbards, and she sang in the choir as usual, listening to the powerful sermons from their Firstly to their Lastly and In Conclusion, without any conviction of sin, although that was usually the subject of the discourse. She still wore her best, made with absurd tucks and flounces by the little dressmaker in King Street, but, in spite of that, some aura of the city clung to her. Young men who had ignored her in her coltish days now angled for her favours, but she 'told them off' in quite her old manner. It was such a relief to let her tongue run without putting on the brake. No young man was permitted to walk down the street with her unless he wore a bowler hat and walked on the outside of the pavement. They found this small change of courtesies irksome. But after the cold beef and cold Yorkshire pudding of Sunday's supper, she was quite ready to return to Nottingham.

"Aye," muttered Mother Hubbard, shrewdly, "you canna settle. You don't live here now."

Indeed, she soon slipped into the habit of returning by the Sunday night train. It was, she told them, such a rush on Monday mornings. But she never told Tom Browning she returned on Sunday evening. It was her own night, and she didn't want him messing around. For, from her

window she could see the last batch of the theatricals come to take possession of their week's 'digs.' Seedy gentlemen with long hair falling on the Astrakhan collars of their coats, handsome juvenile leads in pull-overs, fur-coated minxes with painted faces, coloured crooners, Japanese acrobats, acting all the time ; acting as they stood on the cobblestones, acting as they brought a professional charm to bear on landladies, rigid with respectability yet with hearts of gold beneath their black-bombazined bosoms. She heard the tinkle of cracked pianos, as they tried out new numbers, and she sniffed the fugitive aroma of steak and onions and stout which rose like incense from their evening meal.

These were her own people, and, when she had mastered the lessons in singing and dancing for which Tom Browning was paying, she would join them. Until then, Mossop's was good enough to go on with. She learned things at Mossop's, things as important as dancing and singing.

She trod on carpets like moss, she was addressed as 'Miss Hubbard,' and experienced the exquisite agony of handling flimsy creations she could never hope to buy for herself. At least, not yet. She learned how to walk on excessively high heels, and to move swiftly yet gracefully. She learned that the severe lines of the black regulation dress suited her more than the flamboyant colours and flowing draperies she had at first coveted. And she learned to modulate her voice and to tune it to this hushed cathedral of fashion, but it still remained husky and eager.

Though she 'got on' with the other girls and was popular with the marcel-waved young men of the store, they had little to teach her, and Hilda couldn't be bothered with them. The customers were different. The Duke's daughters came in occasionally. High-spirited young ladies with a directness and charm that Hilda envied. Then there were opinionated old ladies who drove up in their broughams and poked the rosy-checked coachman in the back with their umbrellas when they wanted to stop. They had always traded at Mossop's and always would. They demanded the fashions of the 'nineties,' and woe to

any luckless assistant who ventured to hint that these were not worn nowadays. They asked for Hilda, too.

"What's that you're saying, Mossop? Don't mumble. I've come to complain about these stays. They don't make stays nowadays. Can't hear you, Mossop. Where's that girl with the Titian hair? She's the only one that speaks up."

Yes, Mossops had some queer customers, and Hilda studied them all carefully. They all had money or they wouldn't have come to Mossop's, and she guessed that few of them had earned their fur coats and jewellery by the sweat of their brows. Some man, alive or dead, had financed them.

Cats, some of them were. She looked at their drooping mouths, and wondered what they had given men that was worth a thousand-pound mink coat. Or was it hush money? Their cool insolence infuriated her, but she went on smoothly, "Certainly, moddam. It is Moddam's colour. If Moddam would care to try this—"

There was only a counter between them, but what an obstacle they pretended it was. As if a counter would keep Hilda in her place when she was ready.

Hilda loved her small flat with the passionate love of a child for a doll's house. She had never had a room to herself, never had a drawer in which to lock away her secrets, or a corner absolutely her own to which she could crawl to lick her wounds. But best of all she loved her bathroom. It had olive-green walls, and a pale green porcelain bath with gleaming taps which said "Hot" and "Cold," and, miraculously, meant what they said. If cleanliness were next to Godliness, as Mother Hubbard had taught her, she was a good girl, whatever the matrons of Northedge might say if they knew.

Her day's work done, she stretched full length in her bath, contemplating her slender white form, and slowly rubbing her knees together with sensuous satisfaction.

This was the hour she valued above all others, sandwiched between her busy day at Mossop's and the evening importunities of Tom Browning. She thought of her bath

at Northedge in a zinc washtub before the kitchen fire when the family was safe in bed. A furtive business with cleanliness as its sole object. There was nothing to minister to the pride of the flesh but a libellous mirror, a few inches square. She had never seen herself full length except in the shop-windows on early-closing day when the drawn blinds behind the plate glass made a mirror of sorts, but it gave no idea of the alabaster loveliness buried beneath those cheap clothes. The flesh was something to conceal as quickly as possible. She remembered how swiftly she had slipped into her shapeless flannel nightgown whose only virtue was its warmth, and, with those memories behind her, purred as she looked forward to the caress of gossamer stockings and silken undies.

She kept one eye on the clock, for she expected Tom Browning, and made a little moue of resignation. She didn't dislike him, but she would rather earn what she wanted, only she wanted rather a lot all at once. And the rate for a girl's day labour was pitifully small, yet for a night, men would give the earth. There it was, then. She must have a start.

Her recollection returned to Uncle Alfred holding forth from the hearthrug with his coat-tails tucked up, while she and Dave listened, goggle-eyed, in the shadows.

"Without the word of a lie," he had declaimed, "all the fellows who've got on had to have a start. Some had money left 'em or stepped into dead men's shoes. Others *got* money. Don't ask me how. Ask no questions and you'll be told no lies. They never tell how they made their first hundred pounds. Half the crimes in England are done to get that first hundred. What would I have done if I'd had a hundred pounds?"

"Drunk it," said Mother Hubbard, tersely, snapping off her thread. "Now you children, time for bed."

But they both remembered. They didn't mean to be scrupulous over that first hundred pounds.

CHAPTER XVI

MOSES came back. Mother Hubbard petted him, cooked his favourite dishes, and waited on him hand and foot. He was her first-born. He was doubly hers, for she had toiled to save him from the gallows.

He sat in the chimney-corner, mouth half-open, day-dreaming. All his vitality had drained away, leaving him the empty shape of a man. To make him feel at home, the Hubbards treated him as if nothing had happened. Their efforts to pretend nothing had happened cut him like a whip. When Mother Hubbard shooed him out so that she could clean up, he was hurt. When she fussed after him he knew it was because he had been to jail, and that hurt him, too.

Mother Hubbard hoped he would go to chapel and sing in the choir, but he wouldn't rejoin the choir until he was asked. And John Henry the choirmaster greeted him as if nothing had happened, but he didn't ask him to sing in the choir. He sat in the family pew once and once only. The minister preached, as usual, about sin. Every word seemed to be aimed at Moses. Whenever he lifted his eyes from the hymn-book in which they had taken refuge, he was in time to see the congregation self-consciously looking away from him. He knew now that he couldn't come back. He would have to start afresh in some new place.

Even Hilda failed to wake him from his morose stupor.

It was a resplendent Hilda who burst on him. A fashionable young lady instead of the tom-boy he had left.

"Why don't you sperm up, lad?"

"Nowt to sperm up for."

"What about your singing?"

"Nobody wants to hear a jail-bird."

Then she berated him until he grew livid.

"Shut up," he shouted. "*You* tell me what to do? I like that. You can throw dust in *their* eyes but you don't deceive me, lass. I know what you are. You're just a tart."

"That," she gasped, "is the bloody limit. I guess that's the end of our double act."

"I'm non bothered. I've seen enough of wimmen to last a lifetime."

"Aw, go to hell," she snapped.

The bubble of family unity had burst. Hilda came less and less to Northedge, while Moses decided to make a fresh start in the Doncaster coalfield. Everybody sighed with relief when the family skeleton no longer sat in the chimney corner. Everybody except Mother Hubbard, and she padded about so unobtrusively, that nobody noticed her eyes shining suspiciously and her lip trembling. Moses made them feel uncomfortable. He had killed a man with his hands, had stood in the dock, and had been behind bars like a wild animal. He looked tame enough now, but you never knew.

Abby was delivering groceries for the Co-op. Once a housewife gave him twopence, and occasionally the manager tossed him a stale bun and told him to get his teeth into that. But these were red-letter days. There were other red-letter days when the sun shone and his journey lay on the road to Moorside. Collar work pushing his bicycle and the laden basket uphill, but, when the groceries were delivered, he could scramble up the bank at the side of the road and look down on ribbons of road on which toy cars raced, and toy trains belched smoke. Or he could stretch full length on the warm earth and peer up at a pale blue sky across which galleons laden with pieces of eight scudded before the Trades. Then there was the exciting free-wheel home, swooping round curves at a terrible angle, the wind whistling through his hair.

In Northedge again, padding up narrow gemmills, one eye on the dog, savouring the sour smell of washing, smells of babies, smells of ashpits and earth closets. Shrill housewives scolding him for being late. Old men dribbling in the chimney corner.

"Eli Hubbard's lad, ain't you? Gie him a toffee out o't tin, Eliza. And when are you going down t'pit, young feller-me-lad?"

It frightened Abby to hear the Pit mentioned.

In the evening he escaped. At the Co-op. he acquired all sorts of paper on which to draw. Sometimes the manager let him design a showcard, but nobody took his drawing seriously. Uncle Alfred had forgotten his promise and not another word was said about the Poster Factory, for Uncle Alfred was on the dole and needed all his influence for himself. The master of the British School shook his head over Abby's blind-alley job, but this time he didn't try to get him a free place in the Secondary School. He had lost heart, and looked on, helplessly, as the village slowly rotted. What was one gifted boy among so many, reared with sacrifice, educated at such a cost, just to stand in the lengthening queue of the Labour Exchange until they grew into the shadows of men?

Enoch had married and had taken his bride to West Bridgford to be near the cricket ground at Trent Bridge. He came to Northedge on Sundays, taking tea with his wife's people one week and visiting his own folk the next. For Sunday was still the great day of family reunion, and if the butter was spread thinner and the cake was just 'spotted dog,' the spirit was unchanged.

John was busy in his Union, for trouble was brewing. This wasn't the old, almost personal antagonism of master and man. It went deeper. The miner was being pushed from the position he had won with blood and sweat. He had been a grand fellow while trade was good. Now, almost overnight, he had become a slacker. Pit discipline was tightened up. Overseers and under managers accepted less lip. The rhythm of the Pit quickened in a desperate effort to increase output and undercut competitors. Deputies and safety men were not so pernickety about straining timbers, and bulging roofs, while miners who had families took a chance.

Northedge was a safe pit, but no pit is free from minor accidents, and liberties cannot be taken with coal. Eli's amazing run of luck came to an end. His muscles had lost their suppleness, and though, like all those who had spent a lifetime in the pit, he could sense danger, his limbs

no longer reacted with the swiftness of a youth's. Early one shift he was trapped by a fall of roof, and when he was dragged out, his right leg was crushed.

His face was contorted with pain, but he never moaned or whimpered.

"Tell th' mother it's nowt," he whispered to John, as the ambulance backed up to the pit head. "Ah've had a good innings, but it got me at last."

In the afternoon, Mother Hubbard caught Mr. Dimtry's bus for the hospital. No sleek corporation bus, for that landed a body in the Market Place, half a mile from the entrance, whereas Mr. Dimtry's ancient Ford took you right up to the door. She only caught it by the skin of her teeth, for when she panted into Main Street Mr. Dimtry had already picked up his false teeth from the mudguard where he always parked them in order to converse more fluently, had popped them in his mouth, and was now cranking up the engine.

"Hould on, Mester Dimtry. Here's owd Mother Hubbard coming."

"Come on, Mother," he called, giving her a push up behind.

"Eh, I'm all of a dither," she gasped, flopping down on the nearest seat.

"I bet you are," said the thin woman, nodding her head in sympathy, until the little black beads on her bonnet jingled. "Fall o' roof, warn't it?"

"Ay. Crushed his leg, 'smorning. No time to make mysen decent, and our John's gone and put the clock right so I don't know where I am. Thowt I should a died coming up that hill."

"Single, ma?" asked Mr. Dimtry.

"Return, young man. I dunna want a single to th' Orspital. And you needn't charge me for t'parcel. It's nobbut me man's shirt, bit o' soap, hairbrush, and his knife and fork."

The bus gave a convulsive gasp and jerked forwards. Mother Hubbard bent forward to the little girl in the corner.

"You goin to th' Orspital, Sarah Jane?"

Sarah Jane was smitten with shyness.

"Aye," replied her mother. "Ta'eing her to see her dad. Thinks a power of her, he does. Sit still, you young limb. And I'm ta'eing him a few eggs laid in his own backyard. He canna stomach 'Orspital food. And I've got a bit of cowed Yorkshire pudden in this basket. He'll need summat to build up his strength."

"They wain't let him eat it."

"They wain't see it, and what the eye don't see, the heart wain't grieve. He's ate my pudden for twenty years, and he's going t'ate it now, nurse or no nurse. I know what's good for him better than a nurse that's nivver been wed. Mind you, I don't say as they arena good t' im in their way. But it stands to sense gals canna understand him as I do."

"Doctors is all reight—I always gets on all reight wi' doctors. But I canna abide nurses. Think it's their 'Orspital. And who pays for it, I'd like to know? Thrip-pence stopped every week as is. And when t' Company's stopped Lloyd George, unemployment, rent, field club, 'orspital, and 'allowance,' there's nowt left. Such muck they gi'e for 'allowance' these days. It wain't burn."

"You may well say so, ma. But I reckon my man would be glad to warm hisself at a fire o' allowance coal after that draughty 'orspital. Fair cuts you, the wind does."

"He's a mesh 'un, your Thomas Henry."

"He addles the brass. I reckon he's a right to see the fire. But he wain't addle much more."

"He'll get compo. And 'appen Company'll find him a light job on pit bank."

"And a light wage. You're lucky, ma. Your man isna broken bodied. If his leg isna broken, that is."

"Lucky, am I?" bridled Mother Hubbard. "Was your Thomas Henry trapped on a Friday?"

"Dosta' think Friday's unlucky?"

"I should just think it is unlucky," said Ma Hubbard grimly. "How would you like your man to be rushed off t'Orspital in the singlet he'd worn all the week? Mind

you, Eli's as clean as the next. He weses himself regular at t'sink. But his feet on Friday night's a picture. I dassent look at his nurse."

So they beguiled the time, while the asthmatic old Ford shook and heaved itself to town.

The hospital. Cool, slippery corridors. A smell of iodine. The agony of entering the ward with every eye turned on her. Dumb eyes, like those of dogs waiting to be noticed. There was her man, next to the window. Miles away, it seemed. She padded resolutely forward.

"Good afternoon," she said shyly as she passed each bed.

They grunted, smiled back at her, called her Ma. The ice was broken—and here was her man.

"You've come, have you?" he greeted her.

She brushed this aside.

"Have they—operated?"

"Nay," he said, "I tould 'em I was born wi' two legs and I'd die whole. The doctor were a bit disappointed, I reckon. He'd got a new saw or summat he wanted to try out—"

"Stop your nonsense," she said, patting down his bed-clothes.

"You needn't feel, lass. It's there reight enough. I know it, by God."

That was all they said, but it was enough. Enough to know his leg would be saved, for Eli would break up if he became a cripple. He would be ashamed of a wooden peg, and hide away from his friends in the chimney corner. No more jaunty walks through the closes and up on the moors. No more little poaching excursions. She knew enough of her man not to seek to change him. Let him bide as he was, and wrest what he could from life.

She busied herself putting away his few effects in his bedside locker. This domestic duty made her feel more at home.

"Wish you could shut t'window, lass."

"I dassent."

"If they can't gi'e me a wooden leg, they mean to gi'e me Pewmonia."

"Hush. There's many a true word spoke in jest . . . You've got a grand view here."

"I'd rather see the Pit hill at Northedge anytime."

Other visitors had arrived now, and the room split up into family circles, leaving the Hubbards in their little oasis of privacy.

"You're sure it is all right, Dad? "

"Aye," said Eli, wincing a little as the pain stabbed him.

"Crushed muscle. No bone broken. I s'all mend."

And she was thinking, he drinks, and boasts, he's bone idle sometimes, and he doesn't know the value of money, but he's a brave man. While he, in his turn, was thinking, she's ageing a bit and she natters and fusses but she's a grand lass. Not for worlds would either have let these thoughts escape into words. You could quarrel with words, and words could be used to fill in awkward silences, but you didn't say things like these.

In three weeks Eli was hobbling about at home. He wouldn't be able to return to the coal face for many more weeks, and this fretted him. Every afternoon, he waited impatiently for John's return, so that he could hear at first hand what had been done in the pit that day. They always ended by talking of the strike that must come, sooner or later.

Dave found that penny-a-line journalism did not spell riches. Hard as he laboured, he could barely earn ten shillings a week, with an occasional windfall when he landed an item in the London Press. Little paragraphs about Important People, Rogers told him, found a steady market, but when Important People came within arm's length of Northedge, the London Press came too, generally armed with copies of the speech about to be delivered. There were few crumbs to be picked up at that table.

Enoch brought a little grist to his mill, for the sporting columns welcomed all gossip about footballers and cricketers. Even the height and weight of a new centre forward who was getting his first trial was news. And when grouse

shooting began on the moors above Northedge, Dave reported that the birds were plentiful and strong upon the wing, and so earned an honest half guinea.

Rogers could write a paragraph for one of the chatty columns of the London papers in the exact (and inimitable) style of the man whose name headed it. For a dozen lines he often received a postal order for seven-and-six. As easy as kiss-your-hand, thought Dave until he tried it. He learned in time that even a gossip paragraph had a beginning, a middle and an end, like a Greek play, but, unlike a Greek play, it had to arrest the attention of the man clinging to a strap in the Underground.

Abby was interested in all this, because Abby was an artist and counted no trouble too great to get a thing just right. The rest of the family called it stringing it together and set no store by it. Mother Hubbard was secretly proud, cutting out the little paragraphs and keeping them between the leaves of the Family Bible. She wished they bore the inscription "By David Hubbard." That, her son informed her, was only a matter of time.

Secretly Dave was disappointed by the financial results of journalism. He dreamed of London editors eagerly scanning the provincial papers to discover new writers of genius—a dream which editors foster when they talk for publicity. They would be bound to spot the new comet which was rising in Midlands journalism. But they didn't. They took remarkably little notice when he hawked his genius from one Fleet Street door to another. He would have to find a quicker way.

He thought of it at the Pictures. Like Hilda, he had grown accustomed to the lush comfort of the Arabian Nights palaces, looking good enough to eat, which sprang up like mushrooms in the large towns, and the Palace at Northedge was rather a shock. It was Top Chapel converted, but the conversion had not gone far. The pews had been replaced by tip-up seats, but the texts were still stencilled on the ceiling. It was dusty and frowsty, the floor was bare, and the attendants were slatternly minxes. At the

end of the first picture, he walked out and went to call on Councillor Bindle.

"We want a new Picture House," he said.

"We've got *one*," Councillor Bindle pointed out. "Northedge isn't big enough for two, and Pictures haven't come to stay. They're just a fad."

"Old Huston hasn't done so bad out of it. He's putting it upstairs all right. Seen his new car?"

"I've damned well near been run down by it. Yes, he's making a bit. That's because there's no competition."

"That's where we come in."

"No use, lad. No room for two."

"'Course. That's the idea. Once our Palace de Luxe opens, one of us goes bust. I fancy it might be Huston. Then *we've* got the monopoly. We can show the same films as they show in town and keep Northedge folk at home. Good for your shop."

"Ye-es," agreed the Councillor thoughtfully, "though you're wrong about showing the same films. I been into that. There's priorities and different percentages and damn all. I thought the lingerie knew something about business, but these film people beat 'em. It wouldn't keep the young folk in Northedge, though it might keep the owder folks at home. When the owd ladies get a taste for the Pictures, it's twice a week with 'em and they take it regular as the old man takes his pint."

"Then let's do it," urged Dave.

"We've got to raise the money. And let me tell you, money takes some raising, these days."

"No harm in getting some plans out."

"And get the price of the only decent site jumped up?"

"You mean Main Street? Opposite Baxter's?"

Councillor Bindle nodded.

"Too expensive," thought Dave.

"Name a better."

"Between Meacham's and Tomlinson's."

"It's only thirty yards."

"In frontage. That's all you want for the entrance. The auditorium can run west to east behind the Main

Street property. That's cheap as dirt. The expensive bit will be thirty yards."

Councillor Bindle's eyes glinted.

"If I bid for it, up goes the price. *You'll* have to put it through. Give out you want to start a printing and stationery shop."

"That'll put the wind up old Hodder."

"Yes, that's it. You want the frontage for the shop and the piece at the back for the works. You ought to get the frontage at a pound a foot. The other ought to run to £100 the acre. Half an acre's ample. Say £50. Get the whole bag of tricks under the £150."

So Dave set to work, and started the intricate business of acquiring land, which is like no other transaction. It is a wary business where the principals approach each other with elaborate unconcern, mention land in the abstract, change the subject, sit all night over a pint of bitter, bringing the conversation with Oriental subtlety to the land in particular, and then adjourn to another occasion. There is something about land which belongs to no other property. It hurts to part with it. The idea must soak in through many meetings until the parting can be faced. Even then the sale must be hedged round with restrictive covenants so that the owner feels he still controls some interest in it.

"Got rid of your white elephant yet?" Dave asked Mr. Meacham one night over a pint at the Red Lion.

"Whadyou mean, white elephant?"

"That bit of land in Main Street."

"White elephant! That's the best site i' Northedge."

"What can you do with a bit like that?"

"Lemme tell you, it's a good thirty yards frontage. Just the place for a good shop."

"You're kidding. Who'd build another shop in Northedge? Those we've got are all going down the drain."

"Then whad you're enquiring about it for?"

"Just enquiring. It's no good to me. I've got my eye on a plot in King Street."

"You going into business, young Hubbard?"

"Sometime, 'appen. Don't mean to sweat my guts out for other people all my life."

"What sort of business, might I ask? "

"Oh, printing, I thought."

"You'd want a more central site than King Street if you meant to attract business."

"Don't know that it matters with printing. It's not like hats."

"You could run a nice little line in stationery along with it if you had a central site. One bit of business leads to another, you know, and Baxter's an old stick in the mud."

"No good. Couldn't afford it."

"If you go into business, you can't afford to bury yourself in King Street. Main Street is the only place."

"Until they bye-pass it."

"What's that? "

"Until they bye-pass it."

"You haven't heard anything? "

"Why should I? "

"You get round with old Bindle a lot. He'd hear as soon as most. He's long-eared *and* he's got two faces under one hat."

"Haven't heard a word, but something's got to be done about this through traffic."

"Happen not in my time. I reckon I'll be getting along. Now, if you *should* think of going into business, remember what I said."

"Couldn't afford it."

"How do you know you couldn't afford it? I wouldn't be hard on you."

So the game went on for a fortnight until Dave had an offer for the whole site at £160. Then the owners began to think up restrictive covenants. It must be for a house and shop, with workshop at the back. On no account must intoxicating liquor be sold on the premises. Then there were clauses about drains and fences, and the small-holder who occupied the land at the rear wanted two years' rent for disturbance of tenure, and nine pounds for removing his haystack.

Dave was dismayed, but Councillor Bindle just laughed.

"Make a few enquiries about a site in King Street, and pledge everybody to secrecy. If that don't travel all round Northedge in a night I'm a Dutchman."

To make a good job of it, Mr. Bindle asked the Chairman at the Urban District Council's next meeting whether the Clerk had any information concerning the new bye-pass. The clerk knew nothing about it, the chairman pooh-poohed it, but Northedge said over its cups of tea and its pints of ale that there was no smoke without fire.

Mr. Meacham read the report in the paper, crammed on his hat, and went round to see Dave. In the end Dave promised to take the plot off his hands at £150, free of all restrictions.

"Good," cried Councillor Bindle, rubbing his hands, "now we'll get out those plans."

Dave walked home on air. Mother Hubbard noticed the glint in his eye.

"Bless the boy," she muttered. "What have you been up to now?"

The plans of the Palais de Luxe were most impressive.

"Don't stint yourself," Councillor Bindle instructed the young architect he employed.

The elevation proved he had taken this instruction to heart, and a building faintly reminiscent of the Taj Mahal grew beneath the architect's pencil. This grandiose confection, which was exhibited in Mr. Baxter's window and immediately nick-named Bindle's Folly, was despatched to the Surveyor and was duly considered by the Council. Instead of passing the plans without comment, the Council adjourned consideration of them. Opposition to the scheme was gathering, but Councillor Bindle didn't seem to mind.

The Hustons were furious. They had nursed their Cinema in Northedge from the days when it was a twopenny booth showing the Eruption of Mont Pelee seen through what appeared to be a rainstorm, and the earliest flickering comics of men walking backwards in the same storm. They had always given good value for money, and hadn't

they always run a matinee for men on the night shift, and given a free show to compo men and pensioners?

A petition against the new plans was drawn up, and men, women and children signed, some of them twice, just to prove they meant it. Bottom Chapel was reminded of Naboth's Vineyard. Everybody said how good competition was, but fair was fair and Huston was here first. The Council held a stormy debate but it could find no fault with the plans and they had to be passed. Councillor Bindle smiled enigmatically.

Then Huston, in desperation, went to see Bindle. He found him closeted with David, who got up at once and said he must be going.

"Don't go," said the Councillor, "you're in this."

Huston poured out his story : how he had scraped together the money for his first projector, sticking his own bills, acting as 'barker,' money-taker, operator, lecturer, and chucker-out. All his savings had gone into the business. His whole family depended on it. If it was taken away he was— He broke down and buried his face in his hands. Huge sobs shook his frame. Dave had never seen a man break down like this. He felt sick.

Councillor Bindle must have seen it before. It didn't seem to upset him.

"Competition, Huston," he boomed. "Just healthy competition."

"Competition!" Huston spat out. "It's bloody murder."

"My dear fellow, if we didn't start this, somebody else would."

"They wouldn't. There's not enough money in Northedge for two."

"But a nice picking for one, if you happen to be that one."

They argued back and forth for a bit and then Huston blurted out : "How much do you want to keep your nose out of it? "

"How much?" echoed Bindle.

"You don't want to show Pictures. You're only after brass. So how much?"

"You mean, buy us off?"

"That's what I mean."

"If it's really true that our attempt to modernise entertainment in Northedge would break you, my directors might come to some compromise. But it's only fair to point out they have incurred considerable expenses—"

"Fifty pounds I'll give you and not a penny more."

"Then you're wasting our time. Make it a hundred, and I'll put it before my directors."

Huston's forehead was wet with sweat. He stood silently for a long time and then nodded.

Councillor Bindle stretched out his hand to seal the bargain. Huston ignored it, groped for the door, and stumbled down the passage.

"Nice work," crowed the Councillor. "Easy money. A bit towards your first hundred. What are you looking so sick about? You didn't think I was actually going to build that bloody mausoleum, did you?"

CHAPTER XVII

"We might as well strike as clem."

"Striking's no good," said John. "You can't strike on a falling market."

"What else can we do?" demanded his father.

"Aye, what else? But we can't win."

"By God, we can, and we shall. It's non first time we've tightened us belts. They mun ha'e coal, and they'll ha'e to pay our price before we get it for 'em."

"We can't win," repeated John wearily. "There's too much coal. We can't sell it during the slump. The owners'll be glad to shut down their pits."

"It don't improve pits to shut 'em down."

"No. But a flooded pit hurts us more than it hurts them. They can shift their capital to India where they

pay coolie wages. Plenty of coal and plenty of dividends there. You won't catch 'em wasting money on a flooded pit here just to find you a job when they can make twice as much over there."

"Ah nivver heerd tell of Injuns winning coal."

"No. You only think of Northedge. Or the Notts and Derby coalfield. We're trying to get a national agreement."

"Them Welsh miners are hotheads. Red hot socialists."

"There you go, Dad. Playing the owners' game. They *want* district agreements, and they don't want 'em for our good. We want a national agreement, and then as soon as we can, an international agreement."

"We don't want any truck with furriners."

"If you leave 'em out, what will happen when you strike? You'll find coal being brought here from the Ruhr. The bosses can be international-minded, if you're not. We're up against a bigger thing than bonuses and percentages, forks or shovels, minimum wages this time. We're being forced down to coolie wages and coolie conditions. *We* can't prosper while *their* standard is low."

"The dockers and railwaymen'll back us this time."

"Sez you."

"Well, ain't they voted for it? "

"It's easy to vote. Putting a little cross on a slip of paper won't win this strike. A vote means nowt unless it's the mark of a man who is ready to fight."

"Do you mean to sit there and tell me the vote of the Trade Union Congress means nowt? "

John took his pipe out of his mouth and pointed the stem at his father.

"How many artisans who voted, and how many who never go to their lodge meetings know they'll be called out from their safe jobs in printing shops, in shipyards, in the furnaces, their locomotive sheds and their tramway depots? How do you know that when they find out they won't rat? "

"It's a General Strike this time, lad. A General Strike canna be betten."

"It will be fought as no strike has ever been fought. They'll send naval ratings to work the pumps. Soldiers will guard the pits, and guard the volunteers who run black-leg trains. Men will be sacked and their jobs filled if they don't go back. Some of 'em will lose pension rights. And there'll be plenty of volunteers from the queues outside the Labour."

"You young lads," declared Eli, spitting into the fire with great accuracy, "are mardy. We won strikes afore you was born. Aye even when they fetched out their sojers. You've got no guts for a feight."

"I'd prefer to fight in my own time and on my own ground," said John. "The dice are loaded against us."

"You've got somebody on your side this time, Mother. You've browt him up mardy soft."

"Nay," said Mother Hubbard, "he's got more brains in his little finger, Eli Hubbard, than you've got in your great body. He'll feight when the time comes, and he'll feight longer than thee."

"Aw, shut up," grumbled Dave. "Why can't you settle your business without striking? It never gets you anywhere."

"Hark at him. Just been breeched and he's telling his feyther how pits should be run."

"You don't need to be old in Northedge to learn what nonsense all this strike business is. I've lived on too much bread and jam not to know. And it gets you nowhere. Sooner or later you have to drop this fight to a finish stuff and somebody has to build a bridge or explore an avenue, or leave no stone unturned, so why the Heck don't you do it at first?"

"I nivver expected to sire a shiny arsed pen-pusher, but sin I've got one, he con get on wi' his pen-pushing and leave us to manage affairs we understand."

"That's just it. You don't understand. John does, and if he'd got any sense he'd get out."

"You mean, leave the sinking ship?"

"Well, why not?"

"Because I'm a collier, and proud of it."

"If I'd got any money, do you know what I'd put it in?" said Dave. "Listen. I'd put it in tobacco, art silk, motors, cinemas. That's where the money is. Coal, iron, steel and railways are played out."

John nodded.

"You might add farming. That's bankrupt, too. All the real things. There's no sense in it."

"All the same, that's how it is. And if you're wise, you'll get out."

"Nay, you go ahead and get rich. I'll stand by my own folk."

So the dispute in the coal industry drifted from bad to worse. The N.U.R. and Transport Workers backed the miners, while behind them stood the Trade Union Congress. Solidarity. The dream of the working classes. As solid as Dave's Cinema de Luxe, all built up of crosses on slips of paper which meant nothing if they were not backed by the blood and sinews of the men who had scrawled them.

"It's got to come," was the verdict of Northedge. "Let's get it o'er and done wi.'"

"We can't be worse off than we are now," declared the women.

It is not often that wives support a strike. They are right in the firing line; they and their children are the first victims of the struggle. But this time they were as fierce as their menfolk. For a brief spell, they had tasted a fuller life. Money had been theirs to lay out, if not to burn, and they had gathered together a few comforts their parents had never known. It hurt to give them up. Before they gave up any more, they would fight.

So inevitably, helplessly, the miners drifted into war, and by the laws of civilized warfare accepted in this industry, the open break did not occur until the Spring. In May, 1926, the pits were silent. The men called it a lock-out; the owners called it a strike; but the result was the same. The Trades Unions were called upon to implement their pledges. Solidarity was invoked. And one May morning England awoke to a world in which

trains did not run, in which buses were stopped by pickets, factory chimneys were smokeless, her Press silent.

In Northedge without its customary clatter of pit boots at dawn it felt much like Sunday only there was no distribution of clean linen and the polishing of Sunday boots out in the yard.

The men rose late, washed themselves at the sink with the noises ostlers make in grooming horses, put on their gaudy silk mufflers, called their terriers and whippets to heel, and wandered off.

On the first day many of them tidied up their allotments and cleaned out the fowl pens. Some of them had ramshackle wooden huts on their twenty pole of land and here they camped happily with their pipe of twist and a jug of beer. Others were conscripted for housework, which they performed furtively, hoping their mates would not see them. But generally their wives thrust them out of doors so that they could "get on."

So the bye-lanes were filled with colliers and labourers, the cross-roads with crouching men, blinking in the sun; the click of billiard balls came continuously from the club rooms, and shouts from the football and cricket fields. It was very much like a Bank Holiday. But it wasn't quite like a holiday. There were no papers to tell them who'd won the 2.30, or how many Notts had made. A black-leg train rumbled down the valley with all its windows broken. The Territorials were called up and a guard was posted at the pit head. And a bus with a driver in "plush fours" was stopped in Main Street, and a couple of engineers on strike swiftly disembowelled its engine. Coming black-legging in Northedge, indeed! That would learn 'em.

Then meetings in the evening out in the Toll Bar, for traffic had almost ceased. Solidarity—solidarity—solidarity.

One day slid into another. Sunny days filled with quiet content and the easy certainty of victory. The youngsters let off steam in games and the wise old men tilled their allotments. Non-Union men and women thrown out of work lined up for Parish pay, but the stock of official forms

ran out, and nothing can be done in England without official forms. More windows were smashed, the police growled, "Now what's all this" although they knew perfectly well, the Chairman of the Urban District begged the citizens to be patient while Mr. Hodder printed some more forms. So order was restored.

In Northedge there was no class warfare. The Terriers on guard at the Pit were pit lads themselves. The under-managers and safety men went up and down without molestation. The people at the Hall kept away from the village as if they feared trouble, all but young Godfrey Jedwyn, who got in touch with the strike leaders at the British Legion and organised sports to keep the lads out of mischief. But then he would never regard a man who had fought with him on the Somme as an enemy.

It was different, they said, in London. Feeling was bitter. The well-to-do had left their clubs and their comfortable homes and were driving buses and trains, manning electricity and gas plants, parading the streets, armed with the authority of special constables. Their women folk had, to a woman, jumped into uniform, and those who had no uniform invented one out of a ski-joring suit and a Girl Guide hat. England was at war, and every right-thinking man or woman had volunteered to serve King and Country. Only this time the enemy was not the German who had, after all, only been an enemy for a quarter of a century, but the Lower Classes who had to be kept where they belonged.

Solidarity was a nine days' wonder. And then the nerve of the leaders cracked. They had expected their demonstration of power to result in an offer of compromise. Surely someone would build a bridge, or turn over one of those mythical stones. But force was answered by force. They must either withdraw, or press forward to the logical conclusion that if the Trade Unions dictated the policy of the country they formed its *de facto* Government. They must either govern or get out. Pitifully and meanly they abdicated before they had half won the throne. They did not even secure the reinstatement of the men they had

uprooted from their jobs. They threw the miners to the wolves.

Northedge was stunned when it heard the General Strike was over. Workers in other industries went back to work, mystified that a bread-and-butter strike had been regarded as a revolution, and relieved that their part in it was over. Some of them found that their jobs had been taken over by strangers. All of them found that the atmosphere of the shops had changed. They had been put in their place, and, if they didn't like it, they could call at the office for their cards.

Then to make doubly sure, Parliament battened down the hatches on its industrial prisoners. Henceforth General Strikes were illegal. Privileges which had been won in many a hard battle were cancelled by that complacent assembly. And because men hate to starve their women and children, the workers knuckled under.

But the miners took in another hole in their belts, stuck out their jaws, and went on alone. They had fought alone before.

Strike pay was small, and stretch it as she might, the miner's wife could only just manage. Later, it would be reduced, and the Co-op. would have to allow 'tick.' The immediate trouble was coal. In the midst of abundance of coal which overflowed and glutted the sidings, the miners who had won it ran short. Each householder had drawn from the pit a load of 'allowance coal' a month, for which three and sixpence for haulage was stopped on his wage-ticket. It was poor stuff, which left a load of ash and a smell of sulphur behind it, but it burned. While it lasted, the cottage fires never went out. They were raked at nights and at four or five in the morning replenished until the fire roared right up the chimney.

Young lads were sent to the tips to gather bind. Over the mounds which lay like hogs' backs they scrambled, dragging themselves up by clutching at clumps of ragwort and coltsfoot which were living dangerously on the inhospitable soil. Projecting pieces of yellowish black rock, more like ironstone than coal, were wrenched out and thrust into

sacks. Draggled women with harsh faces and shrill voices groped along the base of the tip. They were widows who had no lads of their own.

Then began the "outcropping" phase. Miners found that by digging deeply in their back gardens they struck a layer of coal. It was fine, practically coal-dust, and burned with a sulphurous smell, but, like the coal from the tip, it burned. It would boil the kettle and bake the bread. Gardens were never cultivated so enthusiastically before.

Dave, while scouting for news, saw many of these excavations, and noticed that they were all at the northern end of the village. The old miners told him that the seam dipped towards the southern end, where a shaft would have to be sunk. Dave rode his cycle past the northern boundary of the Urban District into the open country. At the cross roads nearly opposite the *Peep o' Day*, stood two farm cottages, long since occupied by miners. In the back garden he saw that a miniature derrick had been rigged up, and while he stopped to look a bucket came up, laden with coal. He went over to investigate. A blackened face popped out of the hole.

"Bit of good coal you've got there," he said conversationally.

"Aye," agreed the outcropper. "Real coal. A bit small, but it's not dust. Look at that."

Dave examined the small nugget, and weighed it in his hand.

"Very useful," he agreed.

"Care to have a sack? A bob. It's worth more."

"Quite a business," Dave said, nodding towards the derrick.

"Nay. Just me and the brother-in-law. It's no depth, but this contraption saves back-ache. We don't reckon to sell it, but if you should happen to come along here with a sack after dark— See what I mean, lad?"

Dave swiftly noted the direction of the trench.

"I'll ask the old lady," he said.

He wasn't going to buy coal, but he'd got an idea.

"So long," he cried, and walked off. The next piece

of land was a vacant corner plot of tussocky wind-swept grass. Obviously not valuable grazing. Yes, as he'd thought, a notice board, with the inscription almost weathered away. "This desirable corner site." He scribbled particulars in his note-book and rode on, purposefully, to Ilson. Glancing at his note-book, he identified the address of the small town solicitor.

"That site," said the solicitor, looking at Dave sharply, "is an exceptional bargain. Northedge is bound to develop in that direction—"

"Northedge isn't developing at all, sir," objected Dave.

"Northedge is experiencing a temporary set-back. It will develop inevitably in that direction. It is on the main road—"

"Until it's bye-passed."

"I've heard nothing about a bye-pass."

"But you will, sir," Dave assured him.

"Stuff," exclaimed the solicitor. "Still, if you don't like it you needn't buy. I can only state the lowest price my client will accept."

"And that is? "

"Three hundred pounds."

"That's at the rate of four hundred an acre. As agricultural land it's worth fifty at most."

"Three hundred pounds."

"Any restrictive covenants? "

"None."

"I offer two hundred."

"*Good morning.*"

"Will you please pass my offer to your client? "

"Waste of time. *Good morning.*"

"Very well. I'll deal with him direct."

"Wait. If you'd make a reasonable offer—"

Dave thought hard.

"Split it," he said. "Offer him two-fifty for a quick sale."

"I will ring him up immediately," agreed the solicitor.

"If you will excuse me for one minute."

Dave waited anxiously. He half hoped the deal would

be off, for two hundred and fifty pounds was well beyond his resources. He would have to let in Councillor Bindle, and he wanted this particular racket to be his own.

The solicitor was back again.

"My client accepts your offer," he said. "The usual ten per cent. deposit and the balance on completion."

"I haven't twenty-five pounds on me," stammered Dave.

"Your cheque in the morning will be sufficient. With, of course, the name of your solicitor. Unless you would prefer me to act for both parties."

He sensed Dave's inexperience, but Dave knew about these things.

"You shall have them," he said in the lordly manner of one accustomed to deal in real estate.

And he walked out, treading on air. Then he rode slowly home, revolving in his mind what he would say to Bindle.

He found him in the office behind his shop, engaged in thinking up a snappy advertisement.

"Hello, Dave. You're a scholar. What d'you think of this for an ad.? '*Bindle's Undies Chic-er than ever.*' "

"You can't say *Chic-er*. Try *plus chic*. But I didn't come to talk about undies."

"No. They don't seem to interest you much. But they will. Go on. Let's have it. What have you bin and done now? "

"I've bought a piece of land. Corner site on the main road opposite the *Peep o' Day*."

"I know. I enquired about that. They wanted too much. Had the nerve to ask Two Hundred. Whad you get it for? "

"Two-fifty," admitted Dave ruefully.

"I thowt you had more sense. Whad you want it for? "

"Liss'n. There's a seam of coal running across it, practically on the surface. I saw the stuff being got out of the cottage gardens adjoining, and it's good. Well? "

"Well, what? "

"There's a coal famine, isn't there? "

"You mean run out-cropping as a business? "

"Why not? A shilling a bag. If you fetch it home in your own bag."

"You going to do this yourself?"

"I might. Just to start it. Then I'll get a few miners to lend a hand. Pay 'em ten bob a day. Suppose a man fills twenty bags, I get a pound a day profit. If I get ten miners working, I get ten pounds a day."

"I'm with you," declared Alderman Bindle. "Only you paid too much for that land. Fifty-fifty."

And Dave saw his profits diminish by half, but then Bindle could put up the cash and pull useful ropes. In the end he would be just as well off.

They got going at once, because at any moment somebody might suggest a compromise, and then the racket would be over. But they trusted in Herbert Smith's tenacity and Cook's fanaticism to keep the pot boiling until they had cashed in.

Old Eli came along to look at Dave's purchase.

"Just a spec," Dave told him. "The idea is to hang on a bit, until the price goes up. Only there's coal there, and in the meantime, there's no reason why we shouldn't dig it up. Ma could do with some."

"She could an' all," agreed Eli.

"We might sell a bag or two," hinted Dave. "It would ease my pocket a bit."

Eli agreed it would be a sin not to sell a bag to neighbours who were short.

"Make a bit of bacca money for you."

Eli went straight home, changed into his pit clothes, and brought along his tools. He took charge of the production side.

Dave concentrated on the Sales. He enlisted the services of milkmen, butchers' boys, and laundry collectors.

"If you was wanting a bit of good coal, ma'am," they whispered at the back doors.

And after dark they would dump a mysterious bag in the backyard. One and sixpence would change hands. It was regarded as a lark. The miners thought it was an excellent way of keeping their home fires burning while

the shareholders lost their dividends. "We dunna care how long t'strike lasts" crowed the lucky owners of foot-rills and outcrops.

The strike went on. It was a marvellous summer of clear blue skies. And this year the sky was rarely flecked by a whiff of smoke. Even the leaden pall over Sheffield was lifted. Her forges were silent, her furnaces damped. The molten metal that lit up the hills and tinged the clouds with burnished glory no longer poured into the moulds in the sand. The railways ran a skeleton service, the white-washed stacks of fuel in the yards growing smaller each day. Industry was slowly paralysed. Struggling with depression before, it failed to meet this new trouble with resource. Spindles and looms were silent. In whole towns there was no sound but the clatter of clogs on cobbles and tired voices asking: "How long is this to last?"

The ponies had been brought up from the pit, and had stood blind and trembling when they reached the surface. But soon they were trotting round in circles, rolling in the grass, whinnying in their excitement. The pit lads went to see their old favourites who came up with a shy, sidelong walk at the familiar calls. Then they poked their nozzles into coat pockets for the dainties they expected, but the pockets were empty.

The fight settled down to a war of attrition. Who would squeal first—the plump shareholders or the half-starved colliers? The miners were feeling the pinch. Strike pay was cut to the bone, the Union Officials surrendered their salaries, the pittance paid to the aged miners was stopped. Shops had to give 'tick' although they had bad debts owing from the last strike. It didn't matter whether they gave 'tick' or not, they were ruined either way. Everybody was in debt to the Poor Law Authorities. Only the outcroppers had enough to eat.

They were becoming a class apart. A new aristocracy with money to burn, and like all new aristocracies, strident, overbearing, boastful. They flaunted their money, gambled, drank and whored, and turned the north end of the parish into a mining hell.

Dave was out at all hours, coming home sometimes at dawn to sleep until dusk. He had a car now—a second-hand Morris-Cowley—and he owned a chain of little outcrops all over the coalfield. Coal was rationed, and consumers could only buy from the dealers with whom they were registered, but the illicit trade went on. The outcroppers were threatened with demands for royalties and way-leaves but they crashed through fences with their lorries at night, with number-plates obscured by mud, and ran their coal to their customers or stored it in secret dumps.

And Herbert Smith in his cloth cap, and A. J. Cook, the dæmonic orator, stumped the coalfields and preached the solidarity of the working classes.

Dave kept out of John's way, for John was furious about outcropping. Eli didn't see any harm in it, in reason, mind.

"The coal's theer, ain't it? And if we win it, it keeps us and doesna help t'mesters."

"It's weakening us. The public won't lift a finger to get a fair settlement, so long as it gets coal. And it's splitting the miners. We've got our haves and have-nots now. Once we're split, we're beaten."

"I don't see as it helps us to ha'e an empty grate."

"We've got to set an example. If you bring any of Dave's blackleg muck here, I'll throw it in the midden."

"I didna think it would be any harm in burning a bit in us own fire."

"Look here, Dad, you know Dave's outcrop isn't just a family affair. You know he's employing men—men who'll rat as soon as the Union can't find any more strike pay. And he sells it, hawks it out to the towns, sneaks it in at night. And this thing's only beginning. It'll grow and grow until the edge of the strike will be blunted. Soon the weapon will break in our hands, and all because we saw no harm in it when the business began."

"By Gob, you're right, lad. I con see it now. That's why these varmints can break all the laws that is. T'mesters dunna want it stopping."

He sucked reflectively at his pipe. And then Mother Hubbard came in from the scullery with the scuttle.

"Coalhouse is empty, dad," she announced tersely.

Eli glanced at his son for guidance, but John was humming a little tune and looking out of the window.

"Well?" she said sharply.

"I'll fetch no more o' that blackleg muck. We're on strike, lass."

"I'm non likely to forget it. Am I to get my coal?"

"It's like this, Mother," began John. "This outcropping is going to lose the battle. We've got to make a stand against it."

"You mean I've got to wesh t'pots in cow'd watter?"

Eli shuffled uneasily.

"My God," muttered John under his breath.

"I see," said Mother Hubbard. "I've clemmed in strikes, I've got behind with my rent in strikes, and gone wi'out things I wanted until I've growed too owd to want 'em. But I've non weshed greasy pots in cow'd watter yet, and I'll non begin now. Well?"

"Mother, don't let us down."

"Letting *you* down? It's me who's being let down. Five men to cook for, to wesh for, to mend and darn for, and the one job i'th' house that's theirs, and they cain't do it. Folks'll cry shame on you when they know my coalhouse's empty."

She swept into the scullery, leaving her men-folk dumbfounded. In a minute she was back again, struggling with an ancient mackintosh.

"What's to do, lass?" asked Eli nervously.

"Bide where you are. You're on strike. I'm going to fetch the coal."

"Nay," said her husband. "Stop th' chuntering. I'll fetch thee a bag."

And he shambled off, singing under his breath an old tuneless song whose only words seemed to be "I'll hang me wi' my garter, if ever I marry again."

"Mother," said John softly. "It's not right what Dave is doing."

"You leave my Dave alone," she snapped.

"It's going to cause trouble."

"Are *you* going to cause it?"

"Nay. I'm saying nowt. But trouble's brewing."

"Trouble," she snorted. "Men can always make that."

And John invented a lodge meeting to get out of the range of her tongue. She couldn't help it. It was her job to keep the home together. And the home centred round the hearth, where the bread was baked, the water boiled, clothes dried, and the firelight flickered on children at play. She had suffered the loss of all luxuries and some necessities without a murmur, but for her bit of fire she would fight.

Moses came home, walking and hitch-hiking all the way from Doncaster. If he'd got to starve he might as well starve at home. And Abby was now a man and wanted a man's money, but the Co-op. couldn't afford another man's wage so Abby went on the dole.

Mother Hubbard didn't know whether she was on her head or her heels. It was bad enough to have to feed five men. It took a bit of scheming. But when they sat round blocking the hearth, she felt ready to pack up. Sometimes Abby went up on the moors taking a slice of bread and jam for his snap, but more often he sulked in his corner behind the door. He hated to stand in the Labour Exchange queues, one of the not wanted.

Nobody knew how Mother Hubbard managed. It was her job to manage, and she just did it. When the men had money, they gave it her without question, and she pushed back a little for their beer and bacca. When Enoch came home, he left a few shillings on the mantelpiece. Not that he approved of this strike. There was a lot, he declared impressively, to be said on the Other Side. He'd been in the Company of Gentlemen who ought to know and they considered the Miners were Going Too Far.

Mother Hubbard said, "Yes, my lad," to these words of wisdom, letting them go in one ear and out of the other.

John snorted, "You can be a professional cricketer without being a gentleman's lackey."

And Enoch went red in the face and stood with his mouth wide open, waiting for a retort to come.

"It's a good job some of us have a bit more sense," he managed at last. "I think I'll be getting along."

Hilda came occasionally, very bouncing and grand. She was on the Halls now and learning her trade as she went along. She was often resting, for many of the Halls had been put out of business by the Pictures, and the others were just hanging on by their teeth. But by the Hubbard standard she was prosperous. She, too, slipped a little money under the tea caddy on the kitchen mantelpiece.

It was almost worth a strike, thought Mother Hubbard, to bring the family together like this. If only they wouldn't quarrel. Why, Dave and John were barely on speaking terms. She kept them apart as much as possible, even taking Dave's breakfast up to him in bed to preserve the peace.

Dave loved breakfast in bed. After the thrill of night riding, running the gauntlet of police and strike pickets, and sleeping like a log, it was grand to wake up like a gentleman when the sun was already creeping past the blind, to realise that no bells or whistles could summon him to work. When he was a boy he used to trace rivers in the ceiling cracks, tropical streams where death lurked in the swamps or flew on poisoned arrows from the primeval forest. The gaunt, bronzed Englishman in the prow (or was it in the bow?) beneath whose steely eyes the treacherous natives quailed was Dave, driving them on relentlessly in search of gold. Dave smiled at his adolescent dreams. Gold wasn't picked up like that. But it could be picked up, and he was getting it.

An appetising aroma of eggs and bacon. Eggs with crisp, frilly edges, and bacon done as he liked it—nearly chippy—and toast, not bread. Now the aroma of coffee was added to his abundance. Few people were getting that for breakfast in Northedge. Well, he could pay for it,

so why not? He'd had enough strike rations of bread and jam as a kid.

And then Mother Hubbard, breathing heavily, pushed the tray before her into the bedroom.

"Mam, you shouldn't!" he protested, half-heartedly.

"Can't have good vittles spoilt," she declared, "and I want to get on wi' my work."

They knew their lines and their cues perfectly.

"You're spoiling me."

"Nonsense. I want thee out of the way while I tidy up. Don't you dare to come down till I knock on the ceiling."

Half an hour later he had the kitchen to himself, washed, looked through his correspondence, and went out to fetch his car from Mr. Meacham's garage. It was his second car and was a dashing new Fiat. And as he walked along the Rows, John, who had been waiting outside, fell into step beside him.

"Look here, Dave," said John, plunging into the business, "are you going to stop working that outcrop?"

"What's it to do with you?" demanded Dave.

"It's got a lot to do wi' me. You're working against colliers."

"I'm not. They'll hang themselves if you give 'em enough rope."

"You are, and you know you are. You're working against your own flesh and blood."

"Stuff."

"It's you and people like you are starving the women and children. Your own mother—"

Dave stopped walking.

"Leave Mother out of it."

"I can't. She's in it. You know damn well she hasn't had one week's wage from the whole lot of us."

"Don't be a bloody fool," flared Dave. "What do you think we're living on? Your bit of strike pay or Abby's dole?"

"Do you mean, you're——"

"Yes. I'm keeping you. Put that in your pipe. I'm working against my own flesh and blood, am I?"

"Then you can keep your dirty money."

"I mean to. But Mother isn't going hungry if I can help it."

"What about all the other mothers in Northedge? They'll go hungry if we don't win this fight."

"I can't be bothered with them. I'll look after my own. If everybody did as much, there wouldn't be any need of strikes and speeches and pickets. I've told you before, and I'll tell you again, you're a fool to tie yourself up with these people."

"I told you before and I tell you again, I'm staying with my own folk."

"In two years," bragged Dave, "I shall be able to do more to help Northedge than the whole Miners' Union can. It's men who get things done, not movements. So in the meantime you mind your business and I'll mind mine."

"Very well," said John, turning on his heel. "That settles it. But for Mother's sake you'd better keep away from your outcrop at nights. It might not be healthy."

"That's a threat?" demanded Dave.

"Nay," said John. "It's a fact."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE strikers drifted in twos and threes to the fair-ground—a plot of vacant building land trodden hard as cement—for notices chalked on the pavements had announced a meeting. As the dusk deepened, more and more men elbowed their way into the throng. They came in their working-clothes although it was many months since they had worked. The youngsters had stripped to their singlets. A crowd of silent men, hungry for deeds. They'd had their belly-full of words.

Then the car of the miners' agent nosed its way to the

middle of the fairground and the grizzled leader of many a fight stepped down.

He looked worried, for he was, by temperament, a negotiator, not a fighter. True, he could make a fighting speech : that was part of his stock-in-trade. But a fight to a finish, a fight which might involve him against the forces of law and order, a fight with physical violence was not in his line. He knew all along that a strike on a falling market was a blunder, but he feared Cook's dæmonic invective and the challenge in Herbert Smith's granite jaw too much to stand up against Federation policy. And now the Federation was clamouring for the clean-up of these outcrops, and he had to give a lead.

"Chair!" yelled the audience, facetiously.

He shrugged his shoulders and stepped up on the seat of the car. Then, with the sea of upturned faces in front of him, he forgot his peaceful office, his slippers warming on the brass fender, and the smell of supper drifting in from the kitchen. He could never resist the challenge of an audience.

"Comrades," he began quietly, "we are winning this fight. Make no mistake about that. Not a truck of coal in any part of the country is leaving the pit-heads. You've gone hungry, I know. Now it's the turn of the shareholders to go hungry. There'll be no dividends for them this year. Their property is depreciating. Their shares are worth three a penny on the Stock Exchange. They're feeling the pinch. Time is fighting for us.

"We've got other allies. The industrial leaders of this country are turning against the coal-owners. Remember their mills, their foundries, their forges, live by coal. They have eaten into their last reserves. Soon they must have coal or perish.

"Hang on. That is what I tell you. Hang on a little longer, and victory is yours. Nobody can cheat you of that—(his voice sank to a whisper)—but *yourselves*.

"We have traitors in our midst," he shouted. "Union men who sell the Union by trafficking in outcrop coal.

We're blockading the enemy, and there's a leak in the blockade. What are we going to do about it? "

The upturned faces were tense now. Something was going to happen at last. At the back of the crowd, his rear protected by the Picture House wall, the constable was taking notes.

"We're going to stop that leak! "

"We'll break their bloody necks!" a voice shouted from the shadows.

"We have the right to try peaceful persuasion, and the police spy present at this lawful meeting can copy that down."

"Kick the bastard in the guts."

But the representative of law and order had slipped away.

"There's nothing wrong with peaceful persuasion," continued the speaker, "but if peaceful persuasion fails—" he paused impressively, "well, then, we'll just try persuasion."

The crowd broke into gusty laughter.

"That's the stuff. Come on, lads!"

"Wait! "

The crowd hung on his words now.

"What we do must be done in an orderly fashion. It must be done openly, without concealment. We will march to the outcrops, shoulder to shoulder. We will give a demonstration of solidarity which will convince the outcroppers that we speak as one man.

"There must be discipline. You Northedge men must march behind our trusty comrade John Hubbard. Follow him as you would follow me. Let me feel sure, while I am carrying the fiery cross from one village to another, that Northedge can be trusted to smoke out the traitors in its midst."

He stepped down, patted John on the shoulder, and left him to it. Give the young men a chance, he said to himself, glowing inside with the after-effects of successful oratory. John would have felt better if he could have made that speech. He might then have felt in command of the crowd, instead of being one inconsiderable unit of it.

"Peep o' Day first lads."

"Aye, Hubbard's outcrop is t' worst."

"There's a Hubbard here."

"John's aw reight."

"'Appen. Tha' can't touch pitch—"

"Peep o' Day. Peep o' Day," reiterated the youngsters.

"I've done my best, God knows," declared John, "to shut down Peep o' Day."

"Then we'll help thee."

"We will an' all."

"That's all very fine, John Hubbard, but answer me this—?"

"Eh oop, thee, wilita' lead us against Peep o' Day?"

"That," decided John, "is for the meeting to say."

"If it means a feight?"

"I'm with you," said John slowly, "to the end. We've got to make an end."

"Peep o' Day, lads!" shouted the crowd.

"Peep o' Day, 'tis!"

With the call for action, the hostile mood of the crowd vanished. John was thumped on the back, and his fiercest heckler insisted on wringing his hand. John was learning the first lessons of leadership—to swim like Hell with the current.

Torches were lit, and the lads sucked music out of harmonicas. The Union leaders self-consciously led the way, behind them the old soldiers dropped into step, and the less martial shambled along, while the youths circled round, now in front, now behind.

"Let's have a tune," called John.

Someone started to intone the *Red Flag*, but as soon as it had crystallised into a recognisable tune, the singer was told to shut his gob. The old soldiers took charge, and sang *Mademoiselle from Armentieres*.

And old women saw the light from the torches cast strange shadows on the ceiling, heard the muffled tramp of feet, and crouched over their almost empty grates. They remembered that sound recurring through the long

years, the sound of men marching, and no good ever came of it.

The procession passed the end of the Rows, gathering recruits as it went. The young hussies threw open their doors and shouted obscene encouragement to their men. Mother Hubbard heard it and her lips tightened. For Dave was abroad on his own secret business, and John had gone to a meeting. And now the meeting was on the march with the lust of destruction in its heart. There would be bloody heads before the night was spent. Please God, keep Dave out of harm's way.

The footfalls died away in the distance. She pulled herself together, stoked up the fire, filled the kettle and put it on the hob as she had done when her men were on the night shift. Then she sat down to wait. For that was a woman's duty—to wait, and to bind the wounds.

John marched at the head of his little army. It was a ramshackle army—too individual to keep step and too self-conscious to sing in chorus. It ran, stumbled, shuffled and lurched along. It sang in snatches. Now it was singing a melancholy bawdy song which went on and on, the singers dropping out one by one, until it became a solo. And yet it was more than a mass of individuals. It had fused into an entity—fused by a sense of injustice, of jealousy, of hatred, of a desperate need for action. However it sprawled, it had a purpose.

John was uncomfortable at the head of this procession. He knew the end of the night's work. A little insensate smashing, a few broken crowns, perhaps a night in the cells. It would do no good, but it must run its course. For months the lads had endured patiently, and now their patience was ended. Better a bit of violence than the apathy of despair.

Abby loped behind the stragglers, his long trousers flapping round his thin shanks. He was fascinated by the tossing torches, their spirals of smoke, and the harsh square shadows on gaunt faces.

The singing had died away now, and most of the torches

had guttered out. No sound broke the stillness of the countryside but the heavy tramp of men.

The *Peep o' Day* was in darkness, but the more thirsty hammered on the door. John persuaded them to come along, and, cursing him in a friendly fashion, they rejoined the procession. Over the low stone wall which separated them from Dave's piece of land, they vaulted, spreading out fanwise as they ran over the rough meadow. Some of the men plucked unmortared stones from the wall as weapons.

Over the brow of the field, where an acetylene flare lit up the workings, revealing that the whole of the lower slope was criss-crossed by trenches. Rails had been laid and tubs were being hauled by a cable worked by the engine of a stationary car.

"Come out!" shouted John.

"Fetch the bleedin' blacklegs out!" the crowd howled.

The men below, their blackened faces glistening in the white light of their flare, looked up in alarm. Some clawed for their coats and ran, ducking as they went. Some of them spat on their hands, and grasped their picks firmly. The first boulder was flung into the trench. With a yell, the battle was joined. Someone turned off the acetylene, and the fight went on in darkness. Heaving, sweating men, grunted as they punched, groaning when they went down.

The fight was soon over, and the outcroppers who knew every twist and turn of their trenches slipped from the grasp of their foes. Then followed an orgy of destruction. Tubs, sleepers, improvised derricks, picks, anything that would burn were piled high, and set on fire. It was a satisfying blaze.

"What are you doing here?" demanded John, when he ran across Abby. "Cut along home."

Abby sidled off.

"Eh oop!" called John, changing his mind.

The youngster stopped until his brother caught him up.

"Sithee, kid," he whispered. "Go down the road and stop Dave from coming here. Can you spot his car in the dark?"

"Sure."

"Then stop him. Delay him. Keep him somehow. If he comes now they'll hurt him."

"O.K. big boy," sang out Abby, slipping away into the darkness.

But it was too late. The headlights of a car glared as it lumbered over the turf towards the fire. It came to rest right in the middle of the scene of destruction. John strode forward.

"What the hell are you doing in my field?" Dave was demanding.

"Shut his gob for him."

"Leave him to me," commanded John.

Dave had got out of the car and was staring stupidly at the flames.

"Get out quick," muttered John, "I can't answer for some of 'em."

"So *you're* at the bottom of this. Get out yourself and take your scum with you."

"You've done wrong by these lads. We're on strike, remember . . ."

"Get out, or I'll throw you out."

"Eh," a burly miner crooned, shouldering his way forward. "Say that agen, mister."

"Now Sam," John interrupted. "Leave him to me."

"You want a fight?"

"I'm ready."

Dave was cold with hatred. He wasn't angry very often but when he was, he fought with an icy contempt for the consequences. This little pit was his idea, his way of escape from poverty, and the mob hated him for trying to escape. And John had thrown in his lot with the mob.

John was angry—angry at Dave's contempt, angry at his own brother for acting as a strike-breaker, and angry because Dave hadn't the sense to keep away. He wanted to lamm the young fool and knock some sense into him.

Dave flew at John like a polecat, but old Sam leaped in and pinioned his arms.

"Nay, my young cock. It mun be done in a proper

form. Ma'e a ring there. Fifteen two-minute rounds. Tha'd better strip to it, lads."

They stripped to the waist. Dave was thin and lithe and quick on his feet. John was solid and rather slow, but he had a heavier chest and muscles and a long reach. Sam looked at his watch and touched the button of the motor horn, which was the best he could do for a gong. Dave leaped in and jabbed John under the jaw. John pushed him away. Again Dave came in, head down and arms whirling, only to be pushed away.

"Hit him!" yelled the pit lads.

But John just pushed him off, time after time.

"Hit him!"

No, he couldn't hit that slender figure with a boy's clear skin. That's what he was—a boy.

Round two. Dave rushed in, trying to get inside the guard of John's long reach. For an instant he closed, and thrusting up his head, jerked John's chin up. John backed to recover himself, keeping his brother at arms' length, stumbled over a tussock of grass, and Dave rushed in and planted two shrewd body blows.

Then John lost his temper. There was no further pretence of boxing. It was sheer slogging, with the desire to hurt. They fought round after round until they were swaying on their feet from weariness, and punching flesh until their knuckles were raw and bleeding. Dave had been down three times, and John once. Their eyes were blackened and blood was trickling from Dave's forehead and from John's lips.

Again they stood up, legs far apart like drunken men who know that if they move about their legs will betray them, shambling uncertainly towards each other, and forcing their arms to swing like flails.

"The Police!"

Nobody had seen the car pull up on the high road, and the police had vaulted the wall and were upon them before they had time to close their ranks. The strikers broke and fled, and with their cat's eyes they were threading their

way through the immature workings before the constables could get their bearings.

John disdained to run, but his legs reacted to the cry of "Police!" Unconsciously he quickened his steps, as he had quickened them when he was a small boy trespassing on the pit-tip. He knew he ought not to be running away. He ought to be standing his ground and saying: "I accept full responsibility." Dog-tired as he was, his body took up the challenge, and he ducked, twisted and doubled on his tracks, feeling the sheer elation of escape even while he hated himself for running.

A last glance at the battlefield showed that the police had abandoned the chase, and were grouped round the headlights of the car. Dave was slumped in a heap on the ground, and one of the constables had his note-book out. They were taking a statement. If Dave talked, they would all be up before the Bench on Wednesday.

The fires spluttered out, leaving an acrid smell over the scarred countryside. Northedge settled down to its night's rest, but Mother Hubbard sat up waiting for Dave. His bit of supper was spoiling on the hob. Footsteps approached but passed by as some neighbour, drunk with destruction, rolled home. She turned off the gas for economy's sake, and waited in the firelight.

Her Dave. Where had he gone? And what woman was tending his wounds? Brother fighting against brother. The family divided against itself. Where was this to end?

If they had only stayed young. She remembered the cosy evenings round the fire when the raw life of the Rows was shut out and the children were her very own. Now they had grown away from her. They didn't even bring home their wounds for her to tend.

Footsteps at last. But not Dave's quick light tread. It was John, bruised and blood-stained.

"It's all right, Mother," he explained.

She stood up and peered at him across the dim room.

"Where's Dave?"

"He's safe. The police are looking after him. They'll 'appen bring him home. Be off with you to bed."

"Not till our Dave comes home," she muttered.

But though she sat in her chair until the grey dawn crept into the kitchen, Dave did not come.

CHAPTER XIX

DAVE did not return home that night or for many nights, and when he came, he came as a stranger. His car would pull up with a screech of brakes at the end of the Rows, and he would hurry along and be inside the door before she could untie her apron and dry her hands. Yes, he always caught her like that. Funny that she should mind being in her dirt, but then, Dave always hated cleaning days. It was Dave who had promised her a red dress when he was first britched. Or was it Absolam? She forgot things now.

He was very masterful, standing there on the hearthrug, legs wide apart.

"What are you doing that for? Why don't you get a woman in to help you? I'll pay her. No need to wear your fingers to the bone."

She loved to hear him say it, although she would ha'e no dirty sluts in her kitchen—not while she could stand on her two legs. He would shoot questions at her, just as the doctor did, in a bossy sort of way, and he'd slip a pound note or two under the tea caddy when he thought she wasn't looking, and then he'd get restless and say he must be pushing on. At first, he wouldn't stop for a meal because of meeting John, but later, when the rift had healed, he always made excuses when she'd asked him to stay. Perhaps he didn't like their rough and ready ways at table. It couldn't be her cooking he didn't fancy. Why, he loved her dumplings floating in gravy, and her "toad-i'-th'-hole." Unless, of course, he'd ruined his inside with these messes he got in hotels and lodgings. Anyway, he'd

be gone under the hour. She couldn't keep him any longer. He didn't belong to No. 42 any more.

She was grateful for the money. Not that she spent it all on the household or still less on herself. The bulk of it was tucked inside the mattress of the big bed in which all her boys had been born. It would be there when Dave wanted it. It came easily to Dave, and what came easily could go away just as fast. It looked like real money, and it passed as real money at the Stores, but it couldn't be the same as money that had to be worked for. She hoped he was getting it honest. Yes, it was useful. Strike or no strike, expenses went on just the same. Rent, gas, milk, butcher's meat and bread. Their clothes were falling to pieces but clothes would have to wait. Nobody noticed rags in Northedge. Strike pay had dwindled and what bit there was didn't all come her way. Eli liked his pint and his ounce of shag and it didn't occur to him to give them up. Besides, they kept him sweet. Without them he would be a bear with a sore head, blustering one minute, and the next in the depths of despair.

John was more thoughtful, but he was courting strong, and a man who was courting needed a copper or two in his pocket. She wouldn't ask him for money, not after the way he'd treated her Dave. Moses was singing again, and she was so glad he'd plucked up spirit that she never mentioned money to him. And as he sang in pubs, his earnings passed back over the counter as soon as addled.

If it wasn't for Dave's gifts and Abby's dole she didn't know what she would have done ; and now Abby was moonstruck over girls. He never said a word, the fawse little monkey, but when she had smoothed out the scraps of paper he had crumpled and flung into the grate, she found sketches of girls. Not girls as he used to draw them—a flat plate balanced precariously on their heads, a pig-tail sticking out like a fish-bone, and a triangular skirt of decent length. Now he drew them without clothes, and he put the curves in the right places. Mother Hubbard blushed at the sight of these experimental shots at the nude.

Men were men and everybody knew what they were after, but it wasn't decent to draw pictures of it.

Yes, Abby was in love. He had drawn a poster for the new Palais de Danse, and the manager had given him the run of the place. In his shabby suit, he dare not venture on the floor. But he loved to watch from the gallery where the lights were manipulated. Soon the electrician had taught him the switches and the use of the dimmer, and would leave him in charge while he went round the corner for a quick one. So, for ten glorious minutes, Abby was able to experiment with prismatic colours on a restless whirl of dancers. He made them dance like marionettes in warm orange sunshine, then in the pink glow of sunset, but best he liked them to dance to the blue light of the moon.

He had noticed girls before, girls walking irresolutely in couples, looking behind them, and humming little tunes self-consciously. He took a certain interest in a well-turned leg. But he had never really noticed them until he had seen them in motion on the dance floor.

He picked out Clare Banting very soon. She came on Mondays and Thursdays as a rule, never on the sixpenny nights, which were occasionally noisy and rough. She was petite and dark, perfectly formed, poised lightly, ready for flight. Her nose was snub and tip-tilted, her eyes demure but sparkling with mischief. Abby never tired of watching her dance.

For weeks he worshipped her from afar, making pictures of her in her absurdly short skirt (the trouble he took to catch the swirl of that skirt!) and dreaming of her at night, dancing, always dancing to the absurd jingles of 1926. To speak to her, to hold her, however conventionally, in his arms, he learned to dance. But his suit wasn't good enough even for a sixpenny night. He had to have a new one—a blue serge, shaped at the waist, and with the V shape of the waistcoat cut very low. He knew exactly what he wanted even to the number of useless buttons on the sleeves. His mother could never find the money for such luxury, and he hated to worry her. He wrote to Hilda.

Hilda was on tour, but sent word she would be in Nottingham in a fortnight's time. He managed to live through this agonising period and then presented himself at her flat. Hilda was wearing a kimono and, he guessed, remarkably little else.

"Quite the young man," she exclaimed, kissing him. He blushed furiously. She pushed him down on the settee which engulfed him, and she lit the gas fire.

"I was just having a bath," she explained, "and there's not much time before the first house, so we'll talk while I'm dressing."

She flung her dressing-gown across the room and snatched up various fripperies.

"Don't blush, Abby. Nothing to blush for. You want experience, my lad, or you'll never grow up to be a man. Let alone a nartist. Still want to be a nartist? Can't afford the Art School? You mutt. What you wanna go back to school for? School, my God! Did I ever go to a School of Music? Does a School teach a girl how to put her personality across? Does it tell a singer how to time a joke, or when to slip in a fast one? What would a School of Music have done to Marie Lloyd? Ruined her. Where the hell are my pink knicks? Get up. You're sitting on 'em.

"Liss'n, lad. Schools turn out men like the factories turn out cars. As like as peas. You wanna be different. You wanna be yourself, not a plaster cast of teacher.

"You don't want School. All you want is pencil and paper and practice. Sold any sketches yet? Well, why not? How can you expect to sell sketches if you don't offer 'em for sale? You don't expect the editors of the Comics are going to come down from London on the off-chance there's a kid at Northedge who can draw? Be sensible, lad.

"All right, I've done. Now, about this suit. I'll pay for it. Now don't thank me, lad. I'm not giving it thee. Nay, tha'll ha'e to earn it. Yes, I talk like that when I'm fed up being a lady. You'll pay me back by drawing me for a poster. It's a bargain? Right-ho.

“ I say, is there a girl in this? What a nice colour you’ve got. So it is a girl. Watch out, lad. Don’t let her marry you. You’re too innocent to be married. I don’t suppose you know the Facts of Life yet. It would be ghastly if you married a little bitch because you didn’t know your way about, and then you shot up to be a great artist. You bear that in mind.”

She took him along with her to the Empire and gave him a shilling for the gallery. He’d never seen Hilda on the stage before. She was quite at home there, coming down right to the footlights to chat with the conductor. There! She’d got the band laughing now. Sing? She couldn’t sing for toffee. But she had a way with her, and she could coax the audience to sing. A rusty croaking from the stalls, and piercing whistling from the gods. In an incredibly short time, they were a happy family party. They were reluctant to let her go.

In his new suit, Abby ventured to the Palais de Danse. It was early, and only old Morgan was there, limbering up his fingers on the upright grand.

“ All dolled up,” said Morgan, out of the side of his mouth. “ Fit to kill. You’d be safer up among them lights.”

“ What’s that you’re playing, Mist’ Morgan? ”

“ Like it? ”

“ It’s not a tune, is it? Are you making it up? ”

Morgan came to a dead stop.

“ If I could make up a tune like that,” he confided, “ I shouldn’t be crashing out all this ‘ She’s my baby ’ muck in a stinking colliery village. This is the Waltz in A flat, by Chopin. You needn’t tell me you’ve never heard of him. I know that. Just liss’n.”

Abby listened.

“ What do you think of it? ”

“ I don’t know. It’s sort of—sad, isn’t it? But it’s—it’s beautiful.”

“ It is the loveliest, saddest music on earth. Some day, when you are old enough to fall in love—”

The manager had come in now, looking very pompous in his boiled shirt.

"What on earth are you playing, Morgan? Enough to give a fellow the creeps. Bang out something lively."

"My God!" said Morgan. "You ask for Tin Pan Alley tripe when I play you Chopin."

"Never heard of him. You're too high-brow, Tom. You don't know which side your bread's buttered."

When the dance hall filled up, Abby shyly approached a girl he knew. She grabbed him by the arm.

"You've cleaned yourself up a bit," she remarked. "About time, if you ask me. Come on. That's my foot when you've done with it."

All the girls looked alike with their flat boyish figures, shingled hair, and thin bare arms. From the gallery above they were dainty and alluring—fairy princesses all of them—but then you couldn't hear their pert voices rattling away and they didn't sing the silly words of the 'vocal chorus' in their tinny little voices.

At first he was almost too shy to touch his partner. Only a year or two ago she had chased fowls with him over the garbage heaps of the Rows, stockings down, and knickers breaking from their moorings. And now she was dolled up to the nines with long, shimmering stockings on her slender legs, looking up at him through her eyelashes like Pola Negri and smelling delightfully but strongly of *quelques fleurs*. Women, thought Abby, trying to concentrate on his steps, were difficult.

"Gimme a gasper," she demanded when the dance was over. But Abby had no gasper. He couldn't afford to smoke.

"You are a mean thing," she declared. "Can you Charleston? I can. Only Dad said he'd get the strap to me if I danced it here. Eh! There's Ted Boyce. You watch me tango with him. Boy, you'll learn something."

And she dashed off, leaving him stiff with embarrassment and new clothes. He dare not ask Clare Banting to dance with him. She brought her own dancing partner, generally arriving in a sporting car so noisy that it made 30 m.p.h.

sound like 60. He just didn't know how to begin. So he performed the fairly common psychological trick of dancing with Rosie and imagining she was Clare. And Rosie had never been handled with such delicacy and care. Nobody had ever put her on a pedestal before. She knew exactly how to cope with fresh young men whose hands wandered, but Abby's gentle manners first intrigued and then irritated her. Was he a pansy, after all? Well, he would be useful if he brought Ted Boyce up to the scratch.

On his side, he found her an indifferent substitute, and could dream more effectively without her. Morgan had played him some more Chopin, and some of his phrases haunted him in the night. Leaving the close air of the dance hall, he would walk up the moorland road under the stars, humming snatches he was able to remember from the cascades of clear sad melody with that touch of foreignness, that hint of a courtly age when men were gallant and women beautiful and over all a strange wistful atmosphere of despair.

There he could walk in spirit with Clare, inventing conversation, sparkling with wit and ripe with wisdom, wrapping her cloak about her as the night grew chilly, and when he parted from her, kissing her hand. More than that, he neither hoped nor desired. The thought of Rosie nudging up to him, smelling of *quelques fleurs* and sweat sickened him. Love was a pure, sweet thing. Bodies didn't come into it, and yet he couldn't help tracing the line of Clare's body beneath her exiguous frock as she danced, while in his dreams— He blushed with shame. Why did he dream of naked girls clustering round fountains? Was there something wrong with him?

Yet gradually Hilda's frank display of her charms and Rosie's friendly pawing had their effect. He realised that young women were flesh and blood, and not mysterious strangers from a pure world. Some day he hoped to win Clare. But not while he was on the dole. She wouldn't look at him until he could call for her in a fast sports car. First he would get to be famous. Then when he was Sir Absolam Hubbard, President of the Royal Academy

(for Abby had not yet learned to despise that institution) he would visit Northedge in his Rolls and call on her.

"Will you be Lady Hubbard?" he would say. That would make her open her eyes.

But first he must become famous. For two nights he stayed at home, and drew feverishly, but his pencil wandered into the figure of Clare dancing. The third night he went again to the Hall, and danced with Rosie, pretending she was Clare. At the same time, Rosie was pretending he was Ted Boyce, so neither was completely satisfied. But then, people born in the Rows seldom were completely satisfied. The dance hall was half empty and badly lit.

"Let's go to the Pictures," she suggested at last.

"I can't," he stammered. "I haven't any money."

"Oh. It's on me," she said airily. Girls often paid for their cavaliers in those days, partly because young men knew their own value, and partly because girls could find work when two out of five men were idle.

Abby nodded. Mother Hubbard wasn't there to warn him as she had warned Hilda "not to be beholden." The initiative passed into her hot little hands. His hand passed into hers too, and soon her head was rubbing against his shoulder. He was exquisitely uncomfortable, hating close contacts, and besides, he was cramped. Gradually his shyness wore off. He became absorbed in the story, for the heroine was a little dark girl.

Rosie became absorbed, too, breathing loudly in her excitement, for the hero was a husky fellow who treated his women rough (the spitten image of Ted Boyce), but underneath he had a heart of gold. Abby found his arm was encircling Rosie's warm body.

For over an hour they lived tumultuously at second hand. They were proud and eager, brave and dashing, tender and loving. He had forgotten the dole, she was no longer a factory hand, the world was at their feet. Then with the last exquisite, shuddering kiss, Romance flickered from the screen, the piano crashed out the first bars of the National Anthem, and after groping under the seats for hats and coats, the audience, a little dazed, looked round on an

everyday world. The older couples seemed to shake themselves, look at each other with quizzical eyes, and sigh, before going home to bed. After all, in bed good looks didn't mean anything.

Rosie and Abby escaped into the night before the bubble of wonder had burst. She drew him into a dark gemmill, lifted up her face to his. He kissed her hungrily, and they were locked together in an endless embrace while they dreamed, and the hot blood of youth mounted in their veins.

They broke away at last.

"Where," gasped Abby, "where can we go?"

"I know," whispered Rosie.

Like guilty conspirators they slipped down side streets to the open country, slid through a stile, and crossed a small field to a haystack. Part of it had been cut away like cheese, leaving a ledge about head high. They routed round and found a crazy ladder. Rosie mounted and Abby followed.

"Pull up the ladder," she commanded. "Then nobody can follow us."

Urgent, like young animals, they groped for each other. And though a thought kept hammering inside Abby's head, "This is not what you wanted," they were swept onward by a tide beyond their control. For one brief moment great lights blazed and mighty music sang in his brain. And suddenly peace, stillness, and the cold wind touching his damp brow. The world was still. The tiny night sounds penetrated his skin. Little rustlings, the call of a sheep far off, the hoot of a shunting engine from the sidings. And over all the scent of hay.

The numb receptivity passed off. He stirred, but Rosie pulled him down to her and kissed him. He realised he didn't want to kiss her, but it was easier to do as she wanted.

"We must get home," whispered Rose urgently. "Dad'll flay the skin off me."

CHAPTER XX

THE strike petered out in the fogs of November. The great organisation of the Coal Miners broke up into its district associations, each of which made peace in its own way. Northedge pit re-opened and the men went back to its water-logged workings and its crumbling roofs. There were aching muscles and raw hands in Northedge when the first shift came home. What did it matter? The men were at work again. All comers were welcomed until the pit was in working order and the outstanding demands had been met. The beer pumps worked again in the Red Lion, thanksgivings were offered in Chapel, and the butchers and grocers who had given tick during the darkest days of the strike saw their grateful customers troop into the Co-op. to spend their first week's money.

But before long, the coal was again glutting the sidings. The big firms which had turned to oil were not changing back, and many factories had been struck a knock-out blow. Dealing in household coal, Northedge prospered a little longer, for all domestic coal-houses had been swept clean, but in the end short time came. First five shifts a week, then four, then three. Half on the dole and half on a wage, families struggled on, thankful that things were no worse.

The old men were weeded from the pit, and Eli was one of the first victims, although he protested he was as good as ever he was and could hew coal with the next. His experience counted for nothing, and he was flung on the scrap heap. He drew his old age pension and hoped to draw a further pittance from the Miners' Federation when funds had accumulated. For the rest, his sons must look after him. Did not the Good Book say "Thy bread shall be gi'en thee and thy watter shall be sure"? But he missed his work more than he would admit. He had never been a gardener, so he had no occupation to fall back on, and men, like machines, rot out before they wear out.

The veterans sat on the Council seat opposite the War Memorial, rheumy eyes blinking in the sun. For while the kitchen bricks were scoured and the washing bubbled

in the sett pot, old men were driven from their chimney corners.

With pipes hanging loosely from shrunken gums, and a trickle of spittle glistening on their beards, they waited for the passer-by to ask after their health. It was all that mattered now. Some of them had charge of grandchildren, and warned them of the perils of the hoss-road, though horses had been ousted long ago by Ford vans. Their charges played "snobs" with the white pebbles which were strewn round the base of the War Memorial.

"Cage coming up."

Their eyes were glued on the gear of the colliery. The pit was their life. Out of it they had hewed their living, bought their few sticks, reared their children. Year after year, the pit had claimed its toll, but they had survived the explosion of '89 when the women waited two whole days in the yard to claim their dead, the flood of '92, the cage-crash of '97, and countless falls of roof, which picked off victims by ones or twos instead of by regiments. Yet their twisted hands and creaking joints proved they had not escaped scot free.

All their lives they had fought rheumatics with home-brewed senna or camomile which stewed on every hob. Among them, the pedlar who chanted "Barbary Bark for the liver, Gentian Root for the kidneys . . ." found his steadiest customers. Some pinned their faith on patent medicines, and others held by quaint specifics handed down from the Middle Ages.

"Look at that," and Owd Mo' thrust out a malformed hand. "I've turned many a hundred tons wi' yon. Now look at it. Doctor says there's no cure but t'cemetery."

"Nay," said another ancient, "tha should carry a 'tater in thy pocket. If t'rheumatics go i' th' tater, they canna get i' th' joints. Stands to sense."

"I'll tell thee what," declared old Abe, "I ta'e no heed o' taters, and I've nivver had a twinge of rheumatics for nigh ten years, yet afore that I wor a mask o' pain from head to foot."

His audience hung on his words.

“ And what did Doctor gi’e thee? ”

“ Doctor ! ” he spat contemptuously. “ Doctor canna cure rheumatics. I allus carry a boulder.”

“ A bou’der? ” they echoed.

“ Aye,” he replied, drawing from his pocket a small pebble, “ There’s nowt keeps rheumatics out o’ th’ joints like a boulder i’ the’ pocket.”

They cackled derisively, but as they hobbled home past the War Memorial, each old man stooped and snatched from the path a white pebble.

Eli didn’t belong to this generation, but as he was lonely and the club did not open until eleven, most mornings saw him at the War Memorial talking of old times and new diseases. At first it fair gave him the creeps to hear them sentence their comrades to death. If Tom didn’t turn up, then Tom’s time had surely come. One by one they passed over. It wasn’t so bad for them, for they had one foot in the grave. But for a man as good as ever he was except for this damned rheumatism it was a bit morbid. He wished he had been a better man. Yes, he’d been a powerful sinner in his youth. On his lonely walks in the countryside, he stood and preached to the cows as they chewed the cud. He confessed his mighty sins, and wished he had his time to come all over again.

He ate heartily, but, robbed of his exercise, his food turned sour on his stomach. His neck grew ropy and he had a pain in his side before he had walked two hundred yards. His clothes just hung on him.

“ Eh, you do look badly,” his friends told him, and they recommended various drinks which would make a new man of him.

He complained of feeling dizzy after climbing hills, and he was persuaded to go to the Doctor. After walking up and down the causey outside the door until he was fit to drop, he spermed himself up to get as far as the waiting-room. It was a small annexe built on to a red brick house, and was only used by patients on the panel. Private patients went up the holystoned steps and rang the big brass bell. The deal forms which ran round three sides of

this cubby hole were full. Eli had never seen so many ailing folk at one time in his life. They coughed and wheezed at him, and pushed up to make room for him, including him in their private world of misery. In another minute they'd be showing him their silver tubes and bragging of the pieces that had been cut out of them. The courage oozed out of Eli, and he fled. Thank God he wasn't as badly as all that.

But the dizziness persisted, and he *had* to see the Doctor.

Dave took him in hand this time, although he could walk to the Doctor without any assistance, praise the Lord, and this time he mounted the holystoned steps and pressed the brass bell, and he'd be dommed if he'd go as a panel patient. He'd pay for his bottle of slops like a man, because he wanted proper attention. He'd always suspected this "Lord George" business with cards and stamps wouldn't be worth anything when it came to the pinch. Ninepence for fourpence, indeed! When did a working man get ninepence for fourpence?

"Well, old boy, what's the matter with you?" asked the Doctor.

"Doctor," said Eli wistfully, "I'm badly."

"Tell me all about it."

And he went through the regulation questions, and ran over him expertly with his stethoscope.

"What is it, Doctor?" he ventured, as he buttoned up his shirt. He had, like all other patients, the strictest instructions from home to put this question, and to insist on a straight answer. Unlike most of them, he actually asked it.

"It's called Anno Domini."

"And can you gi'e me summat to cure it, Doctor?"

"There's no cure, lad. It means Old Age. You'll have to go steady. No running up hill, no poaching, no wenching. A seat in the chimney corner, and a quiet walk three times a day between meals. Drink and smoke in moderation. You're on the panel, aren't you. What's your number?"

"Nay, Doctor, this is between me and thee. I want no Insurance doctoring."

"You'll get just the same doctoring whether you pay or the Insurance pays. Get that into your thick skull. The only difference is that I don't hold your hand if you're on the panel. Too busy. And as one working man to another, it's not necessary."

"Working man," snorted Eli, "I'd like to be a working man like thee, I would an' all."

"You'd like to get up at two in the morning to bring colliers' brats into the world, would you? Get along with you."

"What about some slops, Doctor?"

"You don't want slops. Just go steady and don't get excited. That's all, and you *may* live to be ninety."

"'Appen. Thank you, Doctor. Eh, it's a rum business growing owd. I've been a good un in my prime."

Eli had a stroke the following October which took all the use out of his left side. Mother Hubbard nursed him, and toiled up the crazy stairs fifty times a day. But he clung tenaciously to life. Two months later, he was up again, crawling about with the aid of two sticks. The stroke had left him slow of speech and deaf, and he spent long hours in the armchair, thinking of nothing in particular. Sometimes he would burst into tears without reason.

"It's his second childhood," explained the neighbours.

In December, he had a second stroke, and lay rigid in bed until Christmas Eve. Mother Hubbard was quite worn out by that time, even with the help of the District Nurse, and she prayed that God would take him. And then, as if in answer to her prayer, he died, surrounded by his sons.

"It's been a good innings," were his last words.

They buried him in the churchyard on the hill, and the family rallied to pay its last respects. And when the last slice of ham had been eaten, and the last guest had gone, Mother Hubbard was alone. She had done her duty by him, God knew. He had worked and 'played' as it had suited him. He had gone out alone when it suited him

He had had his will of her as it had suited him. And now she belonged to herself. The big bed was hers. She could stretch as she liked or curl into a ball of cosy warmth, for there was no one to rob her of the bed-clothes, no heavy snoring to keep her awake. She was free. For the first time in her life she was free.

And then, quite unreasonably, she burst into tears. She would give anything to climb up those stairs again and tend him in his helplessness.

Life soon settled down again to a dull, leaden rhythm. If Mother Hubbard took her mind off the day's tasks, it was to look backwards, not forwards. There was nothing to look forward to but the peace of the cemetery upon the hill where she would rest beside her man. Her lads didn't need her now. Dave's visits grew briefer, John was courting (a solemn piece she was, with eyeglasses, who got up and spoke at meetings!), and Abby slipped in and out of the house like a cat—just had his meals, and was off. He'd got no job but seemed to addle a bit of money with his drawings. He never told her what he was doing. One of them sly ones, he was. Out till all hours. On the tiles, she'd heard. Well, if he got caught, he needn't bring the girl home with her trouble. Thank goodness Moses was done with wimmen. Though he wasn't much company in the house, sitting in Dad's armchair, brooding, with never a word, civil or uncivil, for a body who washed and darned and scrimped for him day after day.

But one day David came home with that brisk step of his and a light in his eye. She knew what that light meant. He was up to something.

"Put your best bonnet on, Mam," he sang out gaily. He hadn't called her 'Mam' for years.

"Eh, lad. What's all this hurry?"

"You're going out."

"Not in thy motor car?"

"That's right, Mam. So hurry."

"Nay, I canna hurry. I mun change me."

"Do you still change every stitch before you go in a car?"

"Of course I do, lad. When I'm carried into t'hospital I'll go decent."

Dave fidgeted while she was upstairs, poking round, examining the letters tucked behind the pot image of the late Prince Consort. Hilda's scrawl. So she still wrote. Good trooper, Hilda. So the Bassenthorpe Brass Band want Moses to sing at a concert for five shillings. So *that's* what you get for booming away on a platform. Not enough to quench a decent thirst. And here's John's pay ticket. Not much for a week's work. I see they stop the rent from him, now. Well, he should have cleared out when I told him. Picture postcard of Knocker's two kids. All dolled up. Must send 'em something at Christmas.

"Ready, Ma? Must you wear that hideous black?"

"It's my best."

"But why black?"

"When a body gets to my age, a black's useful. Weddings come only once in a while, but there's a funeral of one of us owd folk nigh every week. I like a good funeral."

"That's enough of that, you old grizzler. Come on."

Down the Rows they walked, running the gauntlet of appraising eyes behind every lace curtain, to the sleek black car parked at the end.

"Another?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Sit at the back. Don't wave that gamp. You'll break the window. That's right. Like it?"

"Dave, have you come by it honest?"

"Don't be silly. Lots of people earn enough to buy a car as good. You ought to see the cars at Trent Bridge when there's a match."

"Why, it's like a little parlour on wheels."

"Look," demonstrated her son. "There's an electric light, a vase for flowers, ash-tray for your cigarette, and here's a little table that pulls out. Everything but a sink."

"Why don't they build houses as good as this, Dave?"

"Because they build houses of bricks as they did in Pharaoh's time. Someday I'll take the building industry in hand. All set?"

The car purred round the bend, along Main Street, then with a low melodious note of the horn, turned sharp right into Holmcross Lane, and dipped into a green valley.

"There's a new bungalow," cried Mother Hubbard. "Now, whose would that be?"

Before he could answer they had slid past others, snug behind their privet hedges.

"A lot o' changes," she sighed, "sin I was here last."

They began to climb without slackening speed round a couple of bends and then straight at a steep hill.

"Know this?" Dave called, changing gear.

"Aye. This is where Owd Ben, the carrier, made us get out and walk."

She didn't have to get out this time. The engine purred just a little harder, and they were at the top. Around them stretched a crazy patchwork of coloured fields girdled by red rocks and bracken-green hills.

"Asher," exclaimed Mother Hubbard. "I browt thee and Abby here as lads."

"I remember."

They played the game of 'Do you remember' as they slid down through the village. The church where Mother Hubbard was wed. The Red Lion with its creaking sign. Revill the joiner's, Amos Megrim still waiting on families daily. The Rocking Stone. The Wishing Well where she had wished for a handsome husband. The White Swan where the carrier's cart stopped. But they were going on towards Dale End. The very same journey of years ago although the road wasn't white with dust now but shiny with tarmac.

Dale End where the hills damned up the valley, past the General Stores, and the Toll Bar house, jutting out into the King's highway. Here they turned aside down a once-gravelled drive.

"You can't go any further, Dave."

"Why not?"

"It leads to the Big House."

The big studded gate she remembered so well was open. Dave drove through.

"Dave," she whispered urgently, "you're trespassing!"

He grinned back at her and drove on. A gardener was hoeing the weeds from the neglected drive.

"There's a man, Dave!" she hissed, poking him in the back. The man straightened himself and touched his cap as they went by.

"You are a caution, Dave," gasped Mother Hubbard.

There were the lawns, in three terraces, dipping down to the lake. And then the house came into view.

"Have you got permission, Dave?" asked Mother Hubbard.

"Don't be so fussy, Mother. Leave this to me."

The car pulled up with a crunch of gravel at the open door, and Mother Hubbard caught a glimpse of the stone-flagged hall, panelled, and decorated with stags' heads and old paintings. Dave leapt out and opened the door for her.

"Nay," she insisted, "I won't move a step."

"You must," he whispered. "There's a cup of tea for us. It's all arranged."

"Company?" she queried bleakly. She wasn't prepared for company.

"Just the two of us."

"I nivver thowt the Big House would sink to *Teas*."

As she stood uncertainly on the stone flags, a maid in a lawn cap and apron appeared.

"Well, Phoebe," sang out Dave. "This is my Mother. We'll have tea in the drawing-room."

"Yes, sir. Yes'm," she breathed.

The drawing-room was full of faded brocade. The French windows were open to the sunlight and looked over the lawns to the lake, and beyond to a hillside gay with rhododendrons. Dave set an armchair for her, where she could sit in the shade but see the view. Phoebe came in, pushing a tea-wagon in front of her.

When the first cup had done its beneficent work, Mother Hubbard began to berate him.

"Swanking, you are. I didn't want to come out to tea."

You dragged me here just to show off. The way you carry on just as though you owned the place."

Then Dave dropped his bombshell.

"You see," he explained, "I do."

CHAPTER XXI

It was some time before Mother Hubbard grasped the fact that the Big House belonged to her Dave.

"I was in service here oncet," she mused.

"I remembered that. And do you remember your small son saying, '*I shall build a house twice as big as that when I grow up!*'?"

"Aye, lad. '*With a hundred windows,*' you said. I dreamed of them windows that night. I was cleaning 'em and I couldn't get to a finish. But there was something else you said that I nivver forgot. '*For you, Mam,*' you said."

"Well, I haven't built one twice as big yet. This will have to do for you for a bit."

"Stop joking, lad. What are you going to do wi' it? A hotel?"

"What I said. This is your home. Mine and yours."

"Now, Dave, that's enough of your daftness. I'm ready for home when you are."

She stood up and tidily shook the crumbs from her lap into the hearth.

"No, Mother."

He towered over her in his masterful way, legs astraddle.

"You're not going back to those appalling Rows. You've hated 'em all your life. There's no reason why you should stay there now. This is your own countryside. You belong here—not to Northedge."

"You mean—stop here now?"

"That's what I said."

"You don't know what you're saying. It's—it's too fine for the likes of me."

"Rubbish. Nothing's too fine for you."

"Dave, when you bragged you would build a house twice as big as this, I knowed you would do it. I'm proud you've done it, Dave, but it's not for me."

"Don't you want a home, woman? Don't you want to come and look after me?"

Mother Hubbard's bottom lip was trembling now.

"I'd love to look after thee, lad. But not here. Not with servants. They skeer me."

"Old stick-in-the-mud. You aren't going to scrub and clean any more. You've retired. And you'll just have to get used to servants. They're here to look after you, and if they don't do it, I'll send 'em packing."

"No, Dave. This is your life, not mine. I'm glad you've got what you wanted, but I'm too old to change. I reckon I belong to the Rows now. Soon you'll be taking a wife and when she comes in at the door, I shall ha'e to go back."

"The girl who takes me has got to take my mother as well."

"Yes, Dave, I've heard that said before. But it doesna work. When you wed, I shall come to see my grand childer but I shanna make my home wi' thee."

"You seem to have thought it all out pretty thoroughly."

"That I ha'e. And now we'll be getting along. I mun be home to dish up my men's snap."

"That's it," he stormed, suddenly losing his temper. "I can go to the devil. I've worked and planned for this ever since I was a kid. Nobody else ever gave you a thought except to use you as a drudge. And yet you're ready to turn all this down just to go home to get your men's snap. Your men! What good have they ever been to you?"

"They're my sons."

"Chips of the old block."

"You're not to say such things, David."

"It's time they were said. It's time you had a rest, and I'm going to see you get it. So you can make up your mind to it."

"All the same, my son," she said sadly, but proudly, "I'll be getting back."

"And if I refuse to take you?"

"I've still got my legs and my sperit."

"No good, Ma. You haven't the wind. It's seven miles."

"It's a long time sin' I walked seven miles, lad. I doubt I could do it now."

"Here you are then, and here you'll bide."

"With none of my bits of things?"

"You mean without your nightie?"

"None of your rudery, lad."

"As if," mocked Dave, "I could remember the right house in the right parish, pick the right maid and the right cook, and forget you want a nightie. A nice red flannelette contraption, just like a tent. Come upstairs and look at it."

"Nay. I'll not come. As if I'd be kidnapped by my own son! The idea," she snorted.

She walked over to the fireplace and examined it with critical interest.

"That's right," he chaffed her. "Keep an eye on things. Keep your staff up to the scratch. What are you doing?"

She had noticed a little button at the side of the mantelpiece, and her finger was pressing down on it.

"That's the bell," he explained.

"So I thowt. Mrs. Meacham had one put in after t' war. Though the hussy that worked for her nivver took no notice."

"Phoebe will. What are you going to order when she comes?"

And there was Phoebe standing in the doorway, apple-cheeked and breathing as if she had raced to answer the bell.

"Yes m'm?" she said, poised for service.

"Phoebe—"

Mother Hubbard's voice quavered in this new role, but it went on gamely:

"Is there a motor-car in the village I could get to take me home?"

"Oh, yes'm. Mester Revill's son has started a garridge and he'd be pleased to—"

"That will do, Phoebe," Dave's voice cut in. "I'm taking her home to-night."

"Yes, sir."

Phoebe gave the faintest toss of her head as she went out. Forty years ago . . . Had she looked as fresh and wholesome as that?

"Come on," said Dave, "you win. Back to your pots and pans you go."

"If that's agreed," sighed Mother Hubbard, "I'll be glad to look o'er the house first."

"Just as a sop for me, I suppose."

"Nay. To please mysen. So that I can see thee in thy own home when I look in fire at neet. An owd woman likes to picture her sons going about their business, but mine tell me nowt. They might all be in t' lock-up for all I get to know."

Dave smiled indulgently.

"What will you see first?"

"Kitchen," she indicated promptly.

Down the long flagged passage they went, skirting the foot of the blackened oak staircase.

"May we come into your kitchen, Mrs. Harter?" asked Dave. "This is my mother."

The cook heaved herself to her feet and eyed her visitors suspiciously. Bouncing into her kitchen at that time of day. Gentry didn't do that sort of thing. They knew their place.

"How do you do?" asked Mother Hubbard, all her tentacles out, too. "Are you one o' t' Dale End Harters? I used to play with Connie Harter as was. She married a Wood. Joshua Wood. And there was a sister with a hare lip. I wonder what became of her, now."

"I married Jim Harter," admitted cook, grudgingly.

"Dear me. I remember Jim. Is he—"

"Buried him in '21. A big, hearty man, and he went like a puff of smoke."

"Aye. That's how they go. Seems to me, the stronger the quicker. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. That's a nice stove."

"You ought to have seen it when I took to it. Fair ditched it was. Not another woman in this parish would have stuck it."

Her immense bosom rose and fell as she worked herself up.

"Toil and moil I did, from dawn to dark. Without a word of a lie, and nobody to give me a hand's turn, and them painters slopping their rubbidge down the sink the minute my back was turned. Never again, I said then, and I say it now. Not all the blarney and gold in the world would make me face it again. Indeed it wouldn't."

"Mrs. Harter," said Dave swiftly, when she came up for air, "you worked wonders."

"She didn't ought to have done it," added Mother Hubbard, "wi' hands that could make that puff pastry."

Mrs. Harter's baleful glare disappeared. In fact, she almost mellowed before their eyes.

"It's just a knack," she explained modestly.

"Some day," smiled Mother Hubbard, "p'raps you'll show me?"

"Any time, Mum, you're welcome to my kitchen."

And with banners flying Mother Hubbard padded out of the room.

"You don't talk to servants like that, Mother," instructed Dave.

"Get along wi' thee, lad. I knew the Harters afore thee was born, and I shall talk to folk as I've a mind."

They were taking their time over the stairs now.

"Well, you got good results," admitted Dave.

"And if it comes to that, I heard what she said about blarney, and I could guess who's been using blarney in this house. Th'art a fawse 'un, Dave. That carpet all along the corridor'll ta'e a bit o' cleaning. A morning's work for Phoebe."

"Phoebe does it in ten minutes with a vacuum."

"Vacuum!" she snorted. "Well, it looks clean, anyway. You was always fond of new-fangled things."

"Saves drudgery, Ma. Phoebe's back will be straight—until she leaves here to get married. It's so stupid to have all this drudgery when machines can be made to do the work."

He opened a door and motioned his mother inside. It was a smallish room by comparison with the others, and it housed a small bed with a snowy counterpane just like her own, and the lightest of eiderdowns.

"Whose is this room?"

"Yours," he replied, watching her carefully. "Whenever you want it."

"It's nice," she commented. "I've nivver had a carpet on the floor. It mun be grand to step out on a carpet instead of an ice-cowd floor. What's that dangling down?"

"Look," he demonstrated. "It's a two-way switch. You get into bed and tuck yourself up, and then, when you're quite ready, you can switch the light off without taking your head off the pillow."

"They think of such things nowadays," she sighed.

"Try it."

"It won't electrocute me, will it?"

She played happily with the bulb.

"I see you've got a hot-water bottle in."

"It has to be ready night and day for you whenever you're ready to come. That's Phoebe's orders."

Mother Hubbard turned around quickly because she was afraid her eyes were going to swim.

"What's behind that door?" she demanded.

"Go ahead. Look."

She looked into an immaculate white toilet.

"In the house," she breathed.

"Why not?"

"So that I shan't have to go downstairs and through the yard and wait for the neighbours to have done?"

"Yes. And it's all to yourself."

This time her eyes did brim.

"It would have been a mercy to your Dad when he was ill. It used to vex him to go down to the back. But it seems a sinful waste to ha'e that all for one person."

Then she admired the bathroom, feeling a bit dubious about immersion. All right for youngsters. Nothing seemed to hurt them. Not even the night air in their bedrooms, and running about half naked. But she would love a good wash in the bowl. Taps marked 'hot' and 'cold.' They might be marked 'hot' and 'cold' but she didn't believe it. Dave turned the hot tap to convince her. She dipped her finger in the water. Just as she had suspected—a fraud.

"Give it time, Mother," he advised. "It's got to climb all the way up from the kitchen fire."

And sure enough, it began to bubble in the pipes, and steam, real steam, rose from the bowl and dimmed the lustre of the shining taps. Mother Hubbard was convinced.

"Eh dear," she sighed. "It's nice to ha'e money."

And then she insisted on being driven home.

"I'll not come in," said Dave, when he had pulled up at the end of the Rows. "You're an ungrateful woman."

"Nay, lad," she protested. "I'm none ungrateful. But you do stun a body. I mun ha'e time to turn things o'er. It's the splendidest thing that's happened to me in all my life—except," she added loyally, "when the foreman of the Jury said *Not Guilty*. But it's a bit upsetting, and when you reach my age, lad, you want no upsets."

"All right, Ma. Your room will be waiting. Any time—"

And with a sudden roar of his engine he had gone.

Well, she was glad to be back, glad to put her feet into shapeless slippers, undo her stays, and potter about her own hearth and brew herself a cup of scalding tea which she could teem into her saucer without any fancy maids whisking in and out, watching for a body to do the wrong thing.

"Where's my tea?" demanded Moses as soon as he set foot inside the door.

It sounded like music to her ears.

CHAPTER XXII

JOHN was married now to a schoolmarm wife who wore glasses and spoke at meetings, though she'd have to give up her meetings soon. They lived in a tiny villa on Shepherd's Lane, but she didn't call on Mother Hubbard very often. Too busy working for humanity to bother about human beings, thought Mother Hubbard. But when she had one of her own, happen she'd grow more human.

Moses was away as often as not. He had got on at last, singing at Eisteddfods up and down the county until he had won a gold medal. He'd had to work hard. The boys used to chaff him about his first appearance (that was at Top Chapel) when he had mumbled through a Messiah aria (though why they called it that she could never make out) and when he'd finished the adjudicator had said, "That was a very nice recitation, Mr. Hubbard." Now he was a somebody, and to hear him sing "The Lord is a Man of War" you fair heard the thunder of battle. It was a pity he couldn't wear his best suit to chapel because he looked lovely in it. A huge expanse of starched shirt which no laundry was allowed to touch, a red silk handkerchief tucked in the edge of his waistcoat, and the finest black broadcloth. At least it looked black from the seats in the hall, for of course, it wasn't exactly new.

And now Hilda had got him a chance at a music hall, though it didn't sound quite right to her for a gold medallist to appear on the platform with performing dogs and women in tights. Still, he was old enough to decide for himself. She got out the ink bottle, found one of Abby's brushes, and carefully touched up the seams of his dress suit. Then she starched his shirt, held the hot iron to her cheek to test its temperature, spat on it, and then ironed the white frontage until it was hard, smooth and glossy. If he did well to-night, he might go on tour. He had set his heart on that, so she set her heart on it, too, but it meant he would leave home and she would have nobody left to work for.

No. She wasn't going to hear him. She'd only do the

wrong thing as she'd done at Enoch's cricket match. She would just sit at home and see him with her mind's eye and imagine the thunders of applause. Tears always came in her eyes when the audience stamped and clapped for her Moses to come on again. It was delicious, but it hurt.

Moses went off early, taking all her work as a matter of course, to catch the afternoon train to Sheffield. Hilda met him at the station and took him to her digs where she gave him tea and ran through his songs with him. She had chosen "*Revenge!*" because that had a bit of kick in it though Moses *would* sing it as if it was Handel. Moses never could let go. And the second song was "*Asleep in the Deep*," because that showed off his bottom notes, and the final "*Be-ware!*" coming, so to speak, right out of the tomb, should knock 'em.

She wondered if she should make him walk about a bit, but decided not to muss him up. Let him stand up straight and bellow at the audience. That sort of thing sometimes came off. She'd received his music a few days before, and one of the youngsters in the band had orchestrated "*Revenge!*" while, of course, "*Asleep in the Deep*" was already in the band's repertoire. Every big basso sang it as a matter of course.

At the Empire, Hilda introduced him to the manager, a large, florid man, who regarded Moses with cynical detachment.

"You're on after the Performing Dogs and before the Dinky Sisters. Collier, aren't you? Years since I saw a collier act: "*Daddy, don't go down the Mine.*" Lord, how that song used to get 'em. Not a dry eye in the house."

She took him along to the conductor, who played his music over on the piano and made Moses hum the tune.

"You leave it to me," he said. "We'll pull you through."

Moses was introduced to two other gentlemen who were changing in a small, white-washed cell. They were very helpful as soon as they learned that this was his first turn on the Halls. They pressed drinks on him, put the finishing touches to his make-up, and gave him enough

last-minute advice to wreck the nerves of a less obtuse man. Moses just let their advice slide off his back. They didn't seem to realise that he was a Gold Medallist who had taken on and conquered all comers.

Hilda took him to the wings while the dogs were being clever with hoops, and told him exactly where to stand, and when he was to come forward. The dogs ran off, ran on again to bark their thanks, and the curtain fell. Moses was pushed on, the sign "Extra" flickered in lights on each side of the proscenium, and the band crashed into the introductory bars to his song. He had barely time to lick his lips before the curtains swung aside. A white spotlight which should have lit up his haggard brow played round his boots. The conductor pointed his baton at him, and he plunged in.

*"A frozen serpent in my breast.
Wakes from its slumber cold . . ."*

His voice sounded far away. He remembered Hilda's advice to go forwards towards the footlights.

"Around my heart I feel it pressed . . ."

The band was racing ahead. He hurried after it, and that encouraged it to put on pace. He felt his throat tightening. Somehow he finished the verse.

"Revenge; Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!" he cried mirthlessly.

Without a pause, the band swung into the second verse, which was very much like the first, only more sinister. Somehow he staggered through it. A roll of the drums amplified the modicum of applause. He bowed, the curtains swung together, the band introduced his second song. The curtains yawned, and on he had to go again.

*"Stormy the night and the waves rose high,
Bravely the ship doth ride . . ."*

He could see a blurred picture of white faces, endless rows of them peering out of the dusk at him in his second-hand dress suit. Some of them were shifting, as late comers came in or pushed to the bar. He sang the familiar words mechanically:

*" There on the deck, see, two lovers stand,
Heart to heart beating, and hand in hand."*

He ought to have put more pathos into that. Never mind. Save himself for the chorus.

" Loud-ly the bell in the old tower rings . . ."

Good God, the gallery was singing it with him,—derisively. He felt himself flush under his grease paint. He'd show 'em. He stepped right up to the footlights and opened his mouth and let them have it. By the time he had reached :

*" Many brave hearts are asleep in the deep.
So beware, be-ware."*

he was singing alone. And the abysmally low note of the final "*Beware*" was as clear as a bell.

There was a little crackle of applause and a few catcalls from the gallery.

" My God ! " muttered the manager as he came off. " Of all the ham turns—"

" What do you mean—ham turn? " demanded Hilda. " What was wrong with it? "

" What was right with it? Songs got whiskers on 'em. Can't sing with the band. Stands like a sack of coals. And looks like a bum waiter in that outfit."

" Let me tell you, Mr. Know-all, he's won a Gold medal for singing. And let me tell you where he won it."

" I can tell you where he can put it."

" Don't be funny, lad. It doesn't suit you."

" I'm serious. Shall you tell him or shall I? "

" Tell him what? "

" Tell him as much of the ghastly truth as you care to, but try to make him grasp that there's no second house for him to-night. Or any other night for that matter."

" You can't tell him that."

" Watch me."

" Give him one more chance."

" No."

"Be a sport. I'll take him in hand. I'll shake the stage fright out of him."

"Go and scrap somewhere else," hissed the stage manager. "They can hear your cross-talk act at the back of the pit."

They drifted off into Hilda's dressing-room.

"I know stage-fright when I see it," said the boss. "And this isn't it. He's a born ham."

"It's only an Extra. Nobody cares that much. Give the lad a chance. After all he got better as he went on."

"He couldn't very well have got worse."

"Do it for me, Fred."

"No blarney, young woman. I'm too old for that sort of stuff. You won't shake me."

"Very keen on perfection all at once, aren't we?"

"Damn it, Hilda, I've got a conscience."

"First I've heard about it."

"Wouldn't do to tell you people everything. But we've got our standards and we aren't going to let them down."

"Quaite," said Hilda demurely, dabbing at her face with cotton wool.

"Then when you've finished mucking up your make-up, just slip along and give your boy friend his pass-out check."

"I'm not mucking up my make-up," announced Hilda with hauteur, "I'm taking it off. Now I must clear you out. I'm going to change."

"But aren't you wearing—I say, what are you going to do? You're on in a few minutes."

"Sez you."

"What's the game?"

"Liss'n, big boy. My throat's awful."

"Doesn't sound more awful than usual to me."

"I shouldn't have mentioned it, only you set such a high standard for this conservatoire of yours. Damn it, I have a conscience."

"Do you mean to sit there and tell me you're not going on?"

"You're very bright to-night."

"This is blackmail!"

Hilda honked delicately into her handkerchief.

"It's getting worse. I should let you down."

"Blast you, you baggage."

"Talking to a sick little woman—"

"I'm through. Our lawyers will do the talking. We shall sue you for breach of contract."

"How nice for you. You'll love to go into the witness box and be cross-examined on how you help promising beginners, male—and female. Nice little bed-time story."

"Some day," he said savagely, "you'll be hanging round the stage door, cadging for a drink. When that day comes, don't ask me—"

"I shan't. I shall write my reminiscences."

"Damn you. You win. Go on like a good girl and that ham of yours can do his stuff once more. But not in that God-awful suit."

"Fred, you're a sport."

She hugged him effusively. "I'll see Props and rig him up as a real collier, complete with safety lamp. If we can only find the score of *The Miner's Dream of Home*—"

"Just what you like, darling. It's your show. I've finished."

"No, you haven't. You'll talk to Limes and dress him down. He practically ruined the Act before it had a chance. Then you can tell Dick he's a ham conductor and hasn't got the sense to follow a singer, and there's no need to drown him, anyway."

"Anything else, love?" he enquired with heavy sarcasm.

"You might hint to both of them *and* the scene-shifters who were more noisy than usual, that their habit of bitching an Act because they haven't been tipped is quite understood, and the artists, all of them, will not fork out the usual on Treasury night if there's any discrimination against a new chum. Got that?"

"O.K., darling. You'll end up by getting yourself disliked. Throat better?"

He grinned and was gone.

There were no band parts of *The Miner's Dream of Home*, and in any case, Moses was too dumb to have memorised

the words in time for the second house. She had to use the songs he had, but they must be in character. That dress suit was too awful. So she went round the dressing-rooms, and the artists, good troopers to a man and woman, rigged him up with a heavily-frogged skin-tight uniform for his *Revenge*! and a loose sailor's outfit which would slip on over it for his *Asleep in the Deep*.

And then Dave poked his nose into Hilda's dressing-room. He always looked her up when his business took him within reach of her circuit, so his entry did not surprise her.

"Just going on," she explained, blew him a kiss, and slipped into the wings. Like the artist she was, all the cares of the outside world dropped from her shoulders. She was broke, her head was splitting, she had to make up her mind about an Australian tour, but none of these things mattered. Her audience was waiting.

Ten minutes later, she returned to her dressing-room, the virtue drained out of her. She flopped into her easy chair and gulped down a stiff glass of grog.

"Shouldn't take too much of that," counselled Dave.

"Got to. I've been giving myself to a thousand-odd people. I'm as empty as a licked jam-jar. This is the only way to come back to life. Give me five minutes . . . Say, guess who's here."

"The Lord Chamberlain? He'd be interested in some of your gags."

"No. Somebody you know. *Moses*."

"Has he come all this way to see you? "

"Nope. He's in the bill. Well, not exactly in the bill, but he's an extra turn."

"Did you wangle this? "

"I thought the lad ought to get his chance."

"What was he like? "

"Bloody."

"What's he doing? Conjuring? "

"Idiot. He's singing...Straight stuff."

"He ought to be able to do that."

"He ought. Only he lost his nerve. The band crabbed him, too. The boss said 'No second house,' but

I fixed him. He's got one more chance. You'll have to go in front, and clap your hands off."

"You know, Hilda, old thing, you shouldn't have kept this racket to yourself. I know something about rackets. You leave the applause to me."

"Thank you, Dave."

She got up and stroked his arm.

"You'd better go now. I've got to work on Mo' until the curtain goes up on his God-awful Act. And Mo' isn't a quick worker."

"You're a grand lass, Hilda."

He bent down and lightly brushed her lips.

Dave had a word with the stage doorkeeper and slipped a ten shilling note into his hand.

"Ever heard of a *claque*?" he asked.

He had, but they'd gone out before the last War.

Dave hinted that a *claque* was silly for an established favourite. What was wanted was a *claque* for the beginner, just to give him confidence.

"I get you," said the doorkeeper. "Friend of yours, sir?"

"Brother."

"For a brother of yours, sir, I'd be happy to oblige. But I'm tied to this here door. The man you wants, sir, is the chucker-out at the Green Dragon across the way. They'll be as quiet as Sunday till the theatres turn out, and what he don't know about the *claque* business ain't worth knowing. Shall I send for him, sir?"

So, when Moses finished his first song, a second or so after the band, he was rewarded with round after round of applause, mainly from the gallery. Eked out by the roll of the drums, it was convincing applause though there was no weight behind it. Yet it gave him confidence, and he got through his second number creditably.

But Hilda knew and Dave knew that the manager was right. Moses was a born ham. He would never have a career behind the footlights. He would earn his five shillings or ten shillings and his supper at Chapel concerts or Masonic dinners, but he'd never climb out of the ruck.

They took him out to supper, and he had innumerable drinks with the boys who had the sympathy of their kind for the flops of the profession. And even the Star who was Top of the Bill and an ex-King Water Rat insisted on standing him a drink, for he, too, had spent his youth at the coal face.

"A man's job," he assured him. "Sometimes I wish all this was over and I was back again."

And flushed with the music of applause which grew louder in his memory with every glass of strong ale, Moses never saw how kind they were being to a stage-struck ham.

"It was sweet of you, darling," sighed Hilda as Dave watched her brushing her hair. They were back in her rooms now.

"Useless, I'm afraid."

"He's hopeless. He belongs to Northedge for ever."

"That's just it. *We* got out in time."

"You've not done so badly, young man."

"Nor you, sweetie. I've only got money. You've got fame and everything."

"Everything," she sighed, "but happiness."

"All you mean by that, madam, is that the right man hasn't come along yet. Good night, darling."

He kissed her fraternally. She pulled his face down to hers.

"Must you go," she whispered. "You needn't, you know."

He gently disengaged her hands.

"You're a grand lass, Hilda," he said. "I wish we weren't brother and sister."

"Second cousins," she corrected.

"We grew up as brother and sister, darling. Couldn't possibly think of you like that."

"Why not? What do you think I've been all these years? A pure little virgin? I'm about as virgin as that baby-faced secretary of yours. Secretary my foot."

"So what?"

"So being what we are, why not enjoy ourselves? Oh, I'm not asking you to fall in love with me. Nothing like that."

"Hilda, my lamb, I take my pleasures where I can find 'em, and I pay for them on the nail. You're different. I should have to go on with it."

Her eyes gleamed for a second at this confession.

"And," he concluded, "I can't go on with it. No, Hilda, you're worth something better than that."

"Even if I was satisfied?"

"You—satisfied with that? When was Hilda satisfied with half a loaf? You don't begin to understand yourself. Go to bed like a good girl. Good-night, lass."

And he was gone. Hilda drew the comb mechanically through her hair twice or thrice and then flung herself face downwards on the bed. She was terribly tired. Life would go on, day after day, year after year, but it would be meaningless and empty without Dave.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE years slid by in the dull aftermath of the great strike, and Northedge slowly adjusted itself to the times. The pit had lost pride of place to the hosiery factory where stream-lined girls fed the chattering machines and earned enough to pay for their "perms" and to augment their men-folk's doles. For the miners worked three days and drew dole for the rest of the week. It kept their bodies alive but the swaggering roystering spirit of the collier had died.

When the Paddy Mail drew up, huge-bellied men no longer clattered out, hairy chests exposed to the wind, shouldering their way into the Red Lion Tap Room to toss down their quarts, already drawn and waiting on the zinc counter. No, they biked home unobtrusively, almost furtively, crash helmets on their backs, nothing to show they were colliers but their smut-rimmed eyes. They voted Labour but not for strikes. The Communists ragged them, but they were like whipped dogs. The spunk had gone out of them.

There were no roaring drunks on Saturday nights, and on Sundays only a handful of the faithful gathered in chapel. From the gallery you would see nothing but bald and bonneted heads bowed over the hymn-books. The youngsters were away climbing Kinder Scout, picnicking in Lathkil Dale, or cruising on their tandems along Axe Edge. Lads and lasses wore *beret* and shorts and hob-nobbed in an easy comradeship. They shared their money, their food and their tents. Sometimes they raised their clenched fists in the Communist salute. They faced life sardonically, wise-cracked in language picked up at the Talkies, danced and sang to the machine rhythm of hot jazz. Northedge was workshop and dormitory to them ; nothing more.

In 1929, there was a feeling in the air that prosperity was just round the corner, or had England grown used to the idea of two million unemployed? A Labour Government was in office if not exactly in power, and the Prime Minister talked portentously of the world situation, called conferences and set up commissions. Jimmy Thomas was to solve the unemployment problem, and was reputed to have something up his sleeve. But time after time, motherly Maggie Bondfield had to ask the House of Commons for more and still more money for the Unemployment Fund.

Mother Hubbard jogged along fairly comfortably, slightly contemptuous of the Labour Government, and never realising that in years to come economists would regard this season of hand-to-mouth scraping as a Peak Period. But Mother Hubbard wouldn't have taken any notice of economists, anyway. She knew.

Abby was drawing cartoons for a Birmingham paper, so Moses was the only one of her family at home. He was no trouble, eating what was put before him, and regular as a clock to his meals. But he wasn't much company. He seemed to "go into himself" and brood. Scattered about the house were a few sheets of his printed note-paper, bearing his portrait in his white-starched shirt, and headed, "*Moses Hubbard, Bass Vocalist. Gold Medallist. Terms on Application,*" but there were few applications. Folks wanted

this crooning instead of honest singing. But that was no reason why he should sit numchance in old Eli's chair all night.

Mother Hubbard had never been one for idle chatter, preferring to make one word do the work of a dozen. But she missed the cheerful racket of a family round her. In despair, she tried to goad Moses into talk.

"Stop thy nattering," was all he would say.

Well, if that was all the thanks she got for toiling and moiling for him, the sooner she was put away the better.

She was in this mood when Dave's letter came, reminding her that her room (*her* room!) at the Big House was ready for her, that he would be there by himself for a month, and what about a little holiday? No nonsense about coming to live there. Just a little holiday. Well, she could do with a holiday, and it wouldn't hurt Moses to fend for himself this once. Mrs. Baird would run in and out, and do for him, and if he didn't like her ways, he must lump 'em.

A holiday! She'd never in all her life had a holiday. Nobody but Dave had ever thought of giving her one. She went upstairs to pack her bits of things.

Dave came to fetch her, and the neighbours had something to clack about when they saw her wicker hold-all carried to the shining black car. She felt very grand riding in state, and wanted to wave to her acquaintances as they purred along Main Street, but reflected that it wouldn't be ladylike, and sat rigid instead. When the broad acres of Asher opened like a book before her eyes, she abandoned all pose and talked eagerly of long-forgotten people and places. For this was her country. It was perhaps a mistake ever to have gone to Northedge. Now she was torn between two places and two ways of life: a house divided against itself.

Even as she settled down at the Big House, she began to pine for news of the mining village, and the house in the Rows. She didn't breathe a word of this to Dave, but that house was home. Every brick, every creaking board, every stone of the kitchen floor meant more to her than the soft luxury in which she was lapped. It was part of her.

Yet Mother Hubbard gave her new life a thorough trial. She even had tea in bed of a morning though she was so afraid of ruining the sheets that the joy went out of that first cup. And she never quite trusted the electric light, and wasn't content until she had suborned Phoebe to sneak a candle upstairs for her private use.

She soon made friends with Phoebe, but Mrs. Harter knew her place and wouldn't be cajoled. A pity, for she had looked forward to many a long crack before the kitchen stove where she could warm her knees and teem her tea into her saucer with complete comfort.

Dave spent the first day entirely at her side, showing her the garden, now shaved and pruned like the pictures on the seed packets, and then taking her down the little glen to look at the minnows darting in the shadows and the moorhen slipping secretly along the banks to their nests. For just one day he was the eager, happy-go-lucky Dave of her memories.

The next morning she saw a new Dave, opening letters at the breakfast-table, reading them with steely eyes, crumpling them and flinging them in the open fireplace.

"Paper, mother?" he asked.

"Nay, I canna read the small print."

"Where did you get your glasses from?"

"Bless the boy, where should I get glasses from? Woolworth's, of course."

"My God!" he muttered.

She was up in arms at once.

"They're very good glasses. Your feyther always said they were better than his'n, and he used 'em to his dying day."

"I'll take you to a specialist to-morrow."

"You'll do nowt o' t' sort. They're good enough for me. It's not as if I want to read the paper. You can tell me what's in it."

"Nothing. There's a bank in Austria that's gone bust."

"In Austria!" she sniffed. "I nivver did hold wi' banks, anyway. Look. There's a caller coming."

Dave glanced casually through the window which overlooked the drive.

"That's my typist," he explained. "Miss Smith. Dolores, she calls herself. I'm afraid I shall have to leave you to yourself this morning. I shall be busy."

"I thowt you said this was a holiday."

"The nearest I can get to one," he sighed.

"I shan't be i' th' road if I set around here?"

"Afraid Dolores will vamp me?" he grinned. "Bless you, she's just a piece of office furniture."

"Happen you hadn't noticed she's a good-looking piece."

"I like nice furniture. But I never mix business and pleasure. Miss Smith is quite safe."

"I wasna thinking of Miss Smith. 'Appen she can fend for hersen."

"*I'm* quite safe, then," he assured her. "See you at lunch."

From then on the subdued clatter of the typewriter and the buzz of the telephone mingled with the hum of the lawn-mower and the drowsy noises of the countryside. Mother Hubbard nodded in her chair.

The days slipped by. Once the routine of her labour had been broken, Mother Hubbard felt tired. In this secluded little valley, the change from the astringent quality of the Northedge air left her drowsy and content. She had been proud of the fact that she had never slept out of her bed, but now she took cat naps every time her hands dropped in her lap.

Dave became busier. The telephone was never silent. When she came down in the morning, newspapers were strewn about the breakfast-room as if they had been blown by a typhoon. And such a fuss when old Morgan didn't deliver them on time or brought the wrong brand. They weren't papers as Mother Hubbard understood the term. No divorces, no pictures of girls doing the most wonderful feats in most improper attire, no comic strips. All close print, company reports, and figures.

Then people began to call. Big fleshy men who didn't fit in with the peace of the garden. They called it Dave's

Funk Hole, and what with their whiskey and their cigars made Dave's office smell like a pub. And once Alderman Bindle came. Not the unctuous Bindle of the *lingerie* counter, but a worried, impatient Bindle whose voice rose to shrill squeaks. A Bindle who stamped out in a huff and wouldn't stay for tea. And as she observed him through the window on his way down the drive, she saw he was shrunken and afraid.

That night Dave went off for a long walk by himself over the moors. He said, rather curtly, that he needed exercise. And while he was away the telephone persistently rang. Miss Smith had gone home, and Phoebe took the calls.

"Yes, Mr. Bindle. I'm sorry, Mr. Bindle. He's out at present, sir. P'raps if you was to ring later, sir—"

Six times he rang up. Well, five, anyway.

Telephoning cost money, so she understood, and when Mr. Bindle wasted money, something was up. Dave was worried, too. The old war horse sat up and sniffed. She would have to take him in hand.

He came back late, dead beat, and gulped down a strong whiskey and soda.

"Mr. Bindle's been ringing up," she announced.

"Bindle?" he said absently. "I shouldn't wonder."

"Go to bed, lad," she advised.

"I'm all in," he admitted. "But there's just one or two things I must do first. Never put off till to-morrow," he quoted grimly, "what you can do to-day."

One of his headstrong moods, she reflected, and sat down to wait for him. The minutes ticked on. It was nearly midnight. She went to the door of his study and looked in. He was burning letters, papers and cash books. There was a dare-devil look in his eye.

"Dave," she said softly.

He started as if shot.

"I'm going to bed, lad,"

He came to her, stooped, and kissed her gently on the mouth.

"Good-night, Mam," he said simply.

"Come to bed, lad," she urged.

"Shan't be a tick."

"You asked me here to look after you, didn't you?"
He nodded.

"We've enjoyed these few days together, haven't we?"
Now why was he saying that?

"God bless you, son."

"God bless," he muttered.

She left him. He was in one of his moods when nobody could turn him.

Upstairs in her room she lit her candle and began removing the outer layers of her wardrobe. She undid her stays, and with a sigh of relief, sat down to think things out. Dave had been worried all the time she had been there. But to-night there was more than worry in those brown eyes of his. A wild gleam. He was in danger, and he'd been up on the moor alone to think things out. And now he had decided. What did that burning of papers signify? Escape. That was it. That good-night was good-bye. It wasn't like Dave to kiss. Just a pat on the shoulder, perhaps, but he wasn't the kissing sort. Escape. He was leaving the country to-night. By one of these aeroplanes as like as not. He was always one for extravagance. . . . He's done something, and has got to get away. Please God he gets away safely.

Then she shivered, as if someone was walking over her grave. Wasn't there another way out? A misty recollection crossed her mind of something she had read in the papers years before. Wright, Whittaker Wright, she thought they called him, swallowing a dose of poison as the warders waited to take him below. That's where money led you.

She clicked on her stays again, and holding her candle before her, padded along to Dave's bedroom. No, it wouldn't be there. She would try his bathroom. The shaving cabinet? Yes, there were all his medicines. He was a great medicine taker. That's what came of hotel messes instead of the honest food he'd got at home. She knew all the bottles by heart. It wasn't her business to tidy up after him, but no Phoebe would ever keep her out

of his room. Yes, there *was* something new. A tiny glass-stoppered phial. She wrenched at the stopper and put the phial under her nose. A sickly, pungent smell. A smell outside her experience.

The room swam round. She gripped the wash-basin to steady herself. She mustn't give way, but must act, and act quickly. At any moment his light tread might be heard on the stairs. She shook the phial over the bowl and turned on the taps. Then, having rinsed out the little bottle, she filled it again from his sleeping mixture.

That wouldn't do him much harm, anyway, and would keep him out of mischief for a bit. If he meant to take his own life, she couldn't stop him. Even when he was a child she never could stop him in one of his tempers. The only thing to do with him then was to remove knives and pokers out of his reach until he had cooled off. He was just the same Dave. To-morrow in the cold light of the morning, he'd see things differently. He might even follow her lead. Sufficient for the day: to-morrow must take care of itself. She walked heavily along the corridor to her bed, conscious that she had done what she could.

She lay for a long time, taut, with ears strained for a sound on the stairs. But she was too tired and too old to concentrate for long, and sleep at last claimed her. Before dawn she was awake again, fretting because she couldn't go down to the kitchen to brew herself a scalding cup of tea. The inconveniences a lady had to put up with! If Dave was ruined, at least there'd be no more of this nonsense, thank God.

At last she could bear inaction no longer and levered herself out of bed, sitting on the edge for a minute to recover herself before thrusting her feet into her new lambswool slippers. She dressed with deliberation, grumbling to herself because the hot water wasn't as hot as the tap proclaimed it, and then slipped as silently as she could contrive along the passage to Dave's room. The door was unlocked and she opened it a few inches. He was breathing heavily like a drugged man. She shook her head at him, and gently closed the door.

Down in the kitchen she begged a cup of tea from Mrs. Harter, and if looks killed, Mother Hubbard wouldn't have drawn another breath. But she got her tea and slopped along with it to the breakfast-room to await Dave's coming.

The morning mist promised a fine day. (Fine for some folks, she sniffed.) The lawn was jewelled with dewdrops, and the morning air was like wine. (Night air, of course, was different.)

The birds came right up to the window and clamoured for their crumbs. Knowing little jockeys, always ready for a meal. A wonder they didn't come right inside and sit down to table. Phoebe looked in to see if she was ready for her breakfast.

"Of course I'm ready, Phoebe," she declared. "My stomach's rumbling—"

"You didn't ring, m'm."

"No. I thowt I'd wait for t' mester. But he's o'er-sleeping. You're not to wakken him, though. And I canna wait any longer."

"Very good, m'm. And what will you have?"

"Just what you're having yoursens, my lass."

"Bacon and eggs, m'm?"

"Is it home cured? Then I'll have two rashers and one brown egg. If it's no trouble to Mrs. Harter."

"Very good, m'm."

That's the way to deal with servants, thought Mother Hubbard. Be dignified and firm.

Dave came down just as she was polishing her plate with a bit of bread. He was pale and hollow-eyed.

"Morning," he said. "I suppose it is morning?"

"Good morning, son," she returned gravely. "It's a grand day."

"You look real, somehow. I suppose if I touched that bell Phoebe would answer it?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Just a bad dream I had. Tell you later. Morning, Phoebe."

"Good morning, sir. Home-cured bacon and egg as usual, sir?"

"God forbid. Two slices of toast, and some black coffee."

"Very good, sir."

"Bring bacon and egg as well, Phoebe," added Mother Hubbard, "just in case—"

"Damn your interference," muttered Dave.

Mother Hubbard, with difficulty, sat mumchance, while Dave gulped down his coffee and played with his fingers of toast. The silence became so oppressive that Mother Hubbard collected her knitting and began to click away busily. Dave winced at the remorseless sound.

"Stop that infernal noise," he snapped.

She dropped the knitting into her lap and waited.

"Sorry," he apologised. "My head. It's splitting. And it shouldn't be splitting. That's what annoys me."

"Why shouldn't it?" she asked.

"I don't know quite what I expected," he went on. "No pain, anyhow. Peace, a deep peace, or just the dark. I dunno."

He stirred his coffee moodily.

"But what are *you* doing in this galley? And Phoebe? Going about your business as if nothing's happened. And india-rubber toast? And my infernal head? It doesn't make sense.

"Against my better judgment, I'm beginning to believe I've still got one foot in this wicked world. Surprising, considering—"

"Considering what?" she prompted, her patience at an end.

"Considering," he explained, "that last night I took a dose of poison sufficient to kill an ox."

"So you think," she returned placidly.

CHAPTER XXIV

DAVE's eyebrows lifted ironically.

"I might have guessed," he said quietly. "You always were an interfering old woman. Now I've got to do it all over again."

"No." Her mouth closed firmly over the word. "If you'd been meant to do it, why was I warned?"

"You and your warnings," he scoffed. "You got a warning every night of your life."

"This," she insisted, "was different. It meant I was to save you."

"An idea," he agreed. "But what the Hell am I to do?"

She peered at him over her glasses.

"As bad as that, son?"

"As bad as it could be."

"Hast 'a—done owt wrong?"

He didn't look at her, but just crumpled his toast and stared down at the cloth.

"You know how it is."

"I know nowt, lad. Nobody ever tells me owt."

Dave shrugged his shoulders.

"It's like this, Ma. Suppose you want to buy a house when you've got no brass. You get a couple of friends to guarantee you, and on the strength of this, the banker lends you the money at five per cent. Then when you've got the deeds, you raise a mortgage on the property at four and a half per cent. and pay the bank back. Then you let the house at a rent which gives you seven per cent., and you're making two and a half per cent. without working for it. Do this on a big scale and there you are. Money for nothing. Nothing wrong. No dishonesty. Just a nice little edifice built on credit.

"You buy shares in the same way. You don't pay for them because you can't. You buy at the beginning of a period and you sell out at the end. If the shares go up, you get a nice little wad of easy money. If they go down, you grin and bear the loss. You get tips on good things to buy.

"Then you buy options on sites or businesses and hang on long enough for the price to go up. So long as it *does* go up, you're on velvet. Then people bring their money to you to invest. You buy a nice, sleepy, old-fashioned business, turn it into a limited company, offer shares to the

public, and they fall over each other to get in on the ground floor. You've only got to put your hand up. So long as things go right, the world is yours.

"And then a lousy bank in Vienna goes bust."

"I remember," said Mother Hubbard, glad of one recognisable fact in these bewildering transactions.

"That sets a whole lot of banks rocking. There's a run on them. Queues outside waiting to get their savings out. So the banks shut their doors because they simply haven't got the money to pay out. Then all the banks in the world grow suspicious. They stop tempting you to borrow money. What's more, they want back the money they've loaned you. If your business is in their debt, for two pence they'd sell it for a song in pure panic."

"You're making my head swim, lad. I canna take it in. How do *you* stand?"

"I don't know," sighed Dave.

"Rubbidge," she said curtly.

"Fact. Things have got a bit complicated. Subsidiaries, holding companies, all interlocked. It's like this. The public thinks I'm well off, and so long as the public thinks that, I *am* well off. Just confidence. But as soon as it thinks I'm broke, I'm done for. When creditors want cash—real money—I can't lay my hands on it. The bank won't lend, so I've got to sell. But everybody else is selling and nobody is buying, so all my good shares go for three a penny, and the doubtful stuff isn't as useful as wallpaper."

A momentary gleam came into his eye.

"If I could buy now instead of selling, I could make myself a millionaire. I'd love to buy and damn the consequences."

Mother Hubbard brightened as soon as she saw that gleam.

"Hopeless, of course," he went on. "The fun's begun. Dear old friend Bindle has started the avalanche. I'd forgotten I owed him a little sum. He found it useful to forget it, too, for I put some good things in his way. Things he wouldn't have thought of with his frugal country mind. He's only a small town racketeer, you know. Now he

wants his five hundred pounds if you please. In cash, mind you. Not shares or directorships. In hard cash."

"That's a lot of money."

"Lot of money! It's a flea bite. And yet I can't lay hands on it without selling. And once I begin to sell, all sorts of little twisters will come round with their bits of paper, demanding cash, cash, cash. And shareholders will see the stock-market quotations and think things are wrong, and demand explanations, and throw me out of my directorships. If the companies aren't paying dividends, the debenture holders will foreclose. If they are, the shareholders will be convinced the accounts are cooked. Once the avalanche begins there's no stopping it."

"You've been poor before, Dave."

"And I liked it like Hell."

"Dave, are you sure you came by this money honest?"

He opened the palms of his hands.

"Quite clean," he said. "As much as anybody's are clean. I'm no worse and no better than any other financier."

"Then there's no need to—to make an end?"

"No. But what's the use of going on? The game's up. Better throw my hand in."

"That's not like you, Dave."

"To start again—at the bottom? To be kicked round by doddering idiots like old Hodder? To knock at front doors and be terribly persuasive about vacuum cleaners? Or to crawl round to back doors with dud razor-blades and Old Moore's Almanac? And all Northedge gloating because I'd come down to the gutter. No thank you. I'll go out quietly before the crash. You won't stop me. A nice little car accident—"

"You're talking wild, Dave. Get some bacon inside you and you'll feel fit to face it."

"Bacon! It makes me feel sick. Why should I face it? I don't want to face it. They're all watching me, waiting for me to slip up. Gloating. I thought I had friends. Friends! At least you find out what your friends are worth when things turn out bad. There isn't a soul alive who'd put down five hundred pounds to save me."

"That's where you're wrong, Dave," she said quietly.
"I would."

"Bless you," he smiled. "You would if you could."

"I would *and* I could," she amended.

"You've got five hundred? Go on with you, your mind's wandering."

"You remember all the money you sent me, lad? Five pounds a week regular. And many a pound note you've slipped under Good Prince Albert on the mantelpiece."

"You mean, you *saved* that?"

"Aye. I couldna spend all that money. It didn't seem right. And it wasna' really mine. It belonged to you, and I saved it for you against the time you needed it."

"So you thought I'd need it?"

"Easy come, easy go, I thowt to mysen. If he conna save, I mun."

Dave's face was glowing now.

"But Mother, that's wonderful. With five hundred, I could— Where is it?"

"Wheer do you think it is?"

"Not in the mattress of the big bed?"

"That's reight. That's my bank. And if you'd put your brass upstairs where you could get at it instead of handing it o'er a counter, you wouldn't ha'e to go cap in hand to a bank manager. The owd ways are the best ways."

"My God! to keep all that money in a bed! Why, anybody could have got hold of it."

"The folk that live in the Rows aren't angels, but they don't rob widow women."

Dave got up and paced the room excitedly.

"I'll pay you back a thousandfold," he declared. "Give me—lend me that five hundred and I'll drop it on Bindle's desk and dare him to accept it. I can put the screw on him. I can pitch him out of three directorships to begin with. But if I know my Bindle, he won't let me begin. Come on. Let's get going!"

"Ring the bell," she commanded.

"Getting used to high life, aren't we?" he mocked as he rang.

Phoebe came into the room.

"Phoebe, take the mester's plate downstairs and hot it up."

"Yes'm," breathed Phoebe obediently.

"You'd better get some bacon inside you before you set to work."

"I believe you're right, Ma. I feel I could eat a horse."

While he ate, Mother Hubbard went upstairs to put on her outdoor clothes, for Dave mustn't be kept waiting. Almost before she was ready, the black limousine was ticking away before the front porch. She sat in the back so that she shouldn't see the road with its cattle, its farm wains, and other cars hurtling straight at her, closed her eyes and tried to compose herself. In a series of breath-taking surges they reached Northedge and pulled up at the entrance to the Rows. Neighbours came to the door to pass the time of day as mother and son made their way to number 42.

"*She's* soon wore her welcome out," they observed to each other in sibilant tones of great carrying power. Mother Hubbard heard but did not mind. She sniffed as she crossed the threshold. This smelled of home, but not the warm clean kitchen smell she had left. The fire had gone out and there was a vague odour of stale food and unswept corners.

"Sit you down, lad," she commanded, "while I fetch it."

She creaked up the narrow stairs and entered her bedroom. The bed looked larger than ever and the ceiling seemed to press down on her. That was the worst of going away from home. It made familiar things strange. She could never take things for granted any more.

No hot-water bottle in the bed. Wasn't that just like the slut? After promising faithful to keep the bed aired. She lifted the valance. As she expected, flocks of dust underneath. That proved she'd never been inside the room. A mercy, perhaps, with all that money stowed away. What if burglars had broken in? Her heart missed a beat, and it was as much as she could do to bring herself to look. Yes, there it was, thank God, as snug as

a bug in a rug. Layers of clean one pound notes, put away week after week until Dave should need them. And now he was to have them back.

She groped down the dark stairs again, and spilled her treasure on the table.

"There!" she panted.

"Ma," exclaimed Dave, "you're a wonder!"

He patted her affectionately with fingers that itched to handle the money.

"Count it," she said.

He deftly dealt it into neat piles of fifties.

"Well," she asked at length.

"Four hundred and ninety-eight," he said.

"That's about reight," she agreed. "I can put another two to it."

"Bless you, my dear, I'm not so tight as all that. That's the round five hundred then."

"You'll want a bit of string. I've got a bit somewhere. Let me parcel it for thee."

"It's not fair to take it, Mother."

"It's thine. Ta'e it, lad. And be sure and gi'e that Bindle a piece of th' mind."

Then he was gone, and Mother Hubbard busied herself raking out the ashes and building a fire, while Mrs. Baird, man's cap on head and arms tucked under her apron, propped herself against the door jamb and rendered an account of her stewardship. When she had gone, Mother Hubbard mashed the tea, pulled a wry face at the rim of sediment round her favourite cup and sat down to await Dave's return.

Before she had drained her second cup he was back. One glance told her all she wanted to know. He had failed.

"Tell me," she said, as if it were right to bring his troubles to her knee. There, in the old kitchen, Dave found it natural to confide in her.

"He called my bluff," he explained. "The old fox. I didn't have the chance to take his directorships away. He flung them in my teeth. Said he was through."

"Go on," she urged. "What made him say that? He's non the man to throw money away."

Dave glared out of the window and jingled the keys in his pocket.

"There's something wrong, lad, that you're keeping back from me."

He made no reply to this.

"Spit it out, lad. Don't let it fester inside you."

"He's just a rat. That's what he is. And he thinks it time to leave the sinking ship. He doesn't want to soil his hands—*his* hands, mind you—honest Joe Bindle's hands—"

"Dave," she whispered, suddenly suspicious. "Have you done anything—anything you could be jailed for?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Balance sheets have to balance. Ours balanced as well as most. The trouble comes when a rat like Bindle walks out. Shareholders start asking questions. They think their bit of money ought to earn big dividends, and if they don't get their big dividends, then the directors are rogues."

"Then you aren't afraid of the Law?"

"No. Of course not," he muttered. "But you never know how things will go in a Law Court. If you're caught being too optimistic in a prospectus, you *might* get sent down the line. In any case, once the Law gets hold of you, you're finished. You've lost the public's confidence, and that's what you've been trading in. That's what Bindle can put over me. But he forgot one thing."

"And what was that?"

"He forgot to snatch that five hundred pounds while he had the chance. I've still got it. And thanks to you, Ma, I'll show him a clean pair of heels. By this time to-morrow, I shall be in Paris—"

"Nay," she interrupted. "Tha'lt stay and face the music."

He flushed angrily.

"You'd like me to go to jail, wouldn't you?"

"If you've robbed folk, it wouldn't be right for you to go scot free."

"I haven't robbed folk," he protested. "I may have been a bit—slim, perhaps. Promised too much. Looked on the bright side. After all, nobody could have foreseen this slump. And if greedy people who wanted something for nothing were disappointed, they deserved what they've got. There's nothing wrong in that. Oh, damn it," he cried irritably, "I don't know what's right and what's wrong."

"You're a sick man, Dave, if you don't know that."

"Anyway, I've got to get away. I'm not going to be caught in a trap. I've got to get away."

"No," she said firmly.

"You helped Moses to get away."

"That was wrong of me, and I was punished for it. It would have been easier for Moses to have gi'en hisself up."

"Then why do you interfere with me? Why didn't you let me go out quietly last night? I'm a failure," he blurted.

"Can't even kill myself."

"Dave, you're not to think of that way out."

"You needn't worry. I shan't stick my courage up to that point again. I only want to go away till things blow over. Let me use this money—"

"You're welcome to all I've got, lad, but you'll break my heart if you run away."

Dave sat slumped in his chair, his long lean fingers tapping out a dance rhythm on his knee. Mother Hubbard willed him to choose the hard path as, years before, she had willed him to keep out of the Pit. It hurt her to force this issue on him. She was so proud of him, proud that he had climbed out of the ruck, proud that he could get round difficulties. But he couldn't get round right and wrong. He had got to make a stand. If he failed her now she would never forgive herself.

"Very well," he sighed at length, "I'll stay and see it through."

It hurt him to say it, for it meant beginning the battle all over again, beginning not with the high hopes of youth but with the mark of failure on him.

"You realise what it means?" he went on. "If certain

things come out, it may mean jail. In any case, it's almost certain to mean bankruptcy."

But in that instant of decision, a load seemed to have rolled from his shoulders.

"We mun ha'e courage, lad" the old lady replied stoutly.

CHAPTER XXV

MOTHER HUBBARD thrilled with a new pride when Dave tried to ride the storm. He shortened sail. The Big House had to go, and she grieved at that for his sake, but not for her own. She had lived long enough to learn that people and not places gave savour to life. She wanted him to cut expenses still further and come to live with her in the Rows, but she realised that would be a blow to his pride, and, whatever happened, that must not falter. Yes, he had to keep up appearances, and be cheerful and confident when people called at his Nottingham office. She was content that he should look in occasionally and report progress. True, she didn't understand a word of these mergers, holding corporations, and what-not, but she nodded her head sagely when he announced his plans, just as she had nodded her head thirty years before when a curly-headed urchin confided his plans to her lap, and she had exclaimed, "Bless the lad, whatever will he think of next?"

There were stormy meetings of shareholders, but that was true of all company meetings of that date, and Dave's concerns were, after all, only small-town affairs whose shareholders were afraid of setting the law in motion. Law cost money, and it wasn't sense to throw good money after bad. But one after another directorship was taken from him. And now his creditors were hot on his track. The news seeped round the family that Dave was up against it. There was no family council, no gathering of the clan, but one by one its members had occasion to walk out to the Rows, or thought it was about time to look up the old lady. Just the usual family call. To lift the latch

and sing out, "Anybody at home?" and then to walk in noticing how the room had shrunk, and how Mother Hubbard had shrunk too, and then via the weather, rheumatics, the cost of living, to arrive eventually at the subject of Dave. Was it true he was going up the spout?

But they weren't allowed to come alone. They were accompanied by their women-folk, button-mouthed and wary. Not that they minded helping Dave, but they'd their own to look after. And he'd only himself to blame because he'd been warned. But he was never one for taking advice, and now he'd made his bed, he'd have to lie on it. One day, David looked in and found Enoch and his wife grouped round the fire. Enoch, with the self-indulgent assertion of a prosperous publican, had the air of welcoming Dave into his own bar. His wife, entrenched behind a rampart of bosom, watched this bon-homie jealously. "Not one penny-piece," she was reciting, inside herself. Dave grasped the situation at a glance.

"Nice to see you beginning to take an interest in the old home," he said.

"I don't get here as often as I should like. Can't when you're in business," admitted Enoch, surprised to find himself on the defensive. "We just happened to have a free afternoon, so I said to the wife—"

"Let's go and nose into Dave's affairs," added Dave.

"That's enough, Dave," said Mother Hubbard from the chimney corner.

Enoch's wife rose in a flutter of indignation.

"I didn't come here to be insulted, Enoch. They may be your people but thank God I needn't say the same. I name no names, but some people I know are going to get their deserts—"

"Time's up, old lady," interrupted Enoch. "Got to get back for opening. We'll be coming over to see you again soon."

"Speak for yourself, Enoch," added his wife.

"Anything I can do, old man," Enoch went on, "in reason, mind you, I'll do."

"Not a penny piece," added his wife.

"Can you lend me ten thousand pounds?" asked Dave carelessly.

Enoch's jaw dropped.

"I say," he gasped.

"Yes. That's the figure I'm failing for. That's what you wanted to know, isn't it? What are you going to do about it?"

"What am I—? Well, it's not my business, is it? Look here, we really must be going. You ready, Liza?"

"Waiting."

"One minute," said Dave.

They halted defensively in the doorway.

"You don't often come home, and when you do, I bet you don't ask who keeps things together. When I'm down and out, you can take on my job here. You're the rich man of the family now."

"Mother can always make her home with us."

"When you had her, she stayed two days. She'd wore her welcome out in two days. So you won't get off with that offer."

"That will do, Dave," grumbled the old lady. "You tire me w' all these squabbles. Enoch will do what's right in his own way an' in his own time. Good-day, lad. Good-day, lass. I wish you'd brought my gran-childer to see me."

"Good-night, Mother."

"Good-night, Ma."

And they were gone.

"That's non the way to talk to your own flesh and blood," the old lady persisted.

"I wanted them out of the way. I wanted to talk to you."

Mother Hubbard beamed.

"I've called my creditors together. They won't give me time. If they did, I swear they'd get every penny. So I've got to face the Official Receiver, and they can't get more than a shilling in the pound."

"They won't find out anything?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

And at that moment Uncle Alfred rattled the latch and called out, "Anybody at home?"

Dave looked round for a hiding-place, but he was too late. Uncle Alfred advanced into the room and offered him a limp hand.

"Just come to see how you were getting along, my boy," he wheezed. "What's all this I hear?"

He was rather a deflated Uncle Alfred. His little round cannon-ball of a stomach had sagged and the points of his moustache drooped. His voice had a permanent whine in it.

"You haven't been to see me lately. Too high up in the world. Your Uncle Alfred's not one to bear malice, even though it was my advice that started you on the road to wealth. And I didn't think you was one to kick away the ladder you climbed up by."

"If it's another fiver you're after, Uncle, I'm sorry. I'm bankrupt."

"Bankrupt!" wheezed the old reprobate, prodding Dave in the ribs. "We know what that means, don't we? Cutting out the dead wood, and starting again with the nice little nest-egg you've got tucked away. You can't deceive your Uncle Alfred."

"There's no nest-egg, Uncle. I shall be down and out—selling ice-cream or bootlaces."

"I'm ashamed of you, young feller-me-lad. What you wanted was a wife. Then you'd have made your money over to her, and as soon as the Official Receiver had done his worst, you could have started again in her name. It's too late now, I s'pose?"

"Much too late."

"Then what are you going to do? How are you going to get a start? You haven't got a trade at your back."

"If it comes to that," retorted Dave, "I'm a jobbing printer and a penny-a-line journalist."

And then, as Uncle Alfred had settled down to stay and wouldn't go until he'd been fed, Dave went back to Nottingham.

"It's funny what you said about Dave having a trade,"

began Mother Hubbard. "And what he said about being a printer."

"There's worse trades than a printer's," argued Uncle Alfred. "I know'd a printer who made a good thing out of racing. Used to get the winner of the 2.30 over the wires at 2.31 and tick-tack the result to a pal in the street who'd put on a last-minute bet with a runner whose watch wasn't as reliable as it should have been. If he hadn't overdone it, he'd still be making a good thing."

"I've been thinking," said Mother Hubbard, sweeping aside this irrelevance. "Old Hodder's paper. It's going downhill and the old man wants to retire. Dave could make it pay."

"If Dave bought it, it would have to go into the kitty along with his motor car and the Big House."

"Then somebody else must buy it for him."

"Who is there to buy it?"

"Nivver thee mind. If we only knew what the old man wants for it. If only I had a man in t'house with a business head on his shoulders."

"Now, you leave that to me, my lass," said Uncle Alfred, swallowing hook, line, and sinker. "I'll make discreet enquiries and beat him down to a firm price. Though I'm feared it won't do Dave much good."

But Mother Hubbard knew it would help Dave to keep his self-respect, and would keep him close at hand. She had the keenest sense of money in the small amounts to which she had been accustomed, but when the sum ran into hundreds, she lost all sense of proportion. She was convinced that her five hundred pounds would buy almost anything.

In due course, Uncle Alfred reported that the printing business could be bought for two thousand pounds. There was a mortgage on the property of £800 and another £200 overdraft for which the bank was pressing. The £800 mortgage could be transferred to the buyers. That meant raising £1,200.

"Then there'd be working capital and stocks at valuation. No lass, you can't do it."

"We mun tell David. 'Appen he'll see a way."

So Dave was told.

"Well?" asked Mother Hubbard when Uncle Alfred had involved himself hopelessly in figures.

"Nothing doing," said Dave, curtly. "Do you think I'm coming back here to report the Pig Club?"

Then he saw the hurt in his mother's eyes, and went on hastily:

"It's very sporting of you—both of you—but it's quite impossible. Besides you'd lose every penny of your money."

"I wouldna' grudge that—"

"I would, though. It's all you've got now I've fallen down."

"You said when you worked at Hodder's—"

"I know," he interrupted. "It was a going concern then. It's gone now. Besides you don't know how to buy a business. The Bank is pressing Hodder. He'll *have* to sell at any old price. And then he's in queer street. He'll take any figure which will let him end his days in peace. Offer him a job, or, better still, offer him two pound a week for the next ten years, and you can make the cash payment as small as you like. Do as you will, of course, but don't ask me to run the damn business."

And he stormed out of the room.

Uncle Alfred shook his head.

"He was interested though," said Ma Hubbard. "It sounded to me as if he'd been thinking of it hissen. 'Appen if we let the idea sink in—"

"Nay, he won't knuckle under to it. It won't be easy with the people of Northedge pointing the finger of scorn at him."

"He's got to do it. He's got to do something real. Don't you see, Alfred, he's been up in the air with his companies and shares and what not. Just bubbles. That's no sort of job for a man."

"It's a come-down all the same, old girl. Mind you, I've know'd it done. But not by a single feller. If he had

a wife tugging at his heart-strings he'd 'appen knuckle down. No. I doubt he'll do it."

"He will."

"You'll not make him."

"Nay. I'll not be able to ma'e him. But I know someone who will. Alfred, you're a scholard. Sit you down and write me a bit of a letter and I'll put my mark to it. I'm no hand at writing. There's a pen at the back o' th' clock."

"Pen!" scoffed Uncle Alfred. "Look at it."

"We hanna much use for pens in this house. It does for what little writing we want."

Uncle Alfred squared his shoulders.

"Well?" he demanded.

"'Dear Hilda,'" she dictated. "'Dave's in trouble—'"

CHAPTER XXVI

HILDA heard the call, and one Sunday morning pushed open the door of No. 42 and slumped into the nearest chair. After her second house on Saturday at Newcastle she had driven through the night in her crazy little two-seater, and was all in.

Mother Hubbard fried her a man's breakfast while she brought Hilda's news up to date.

"Where can I see him?" she asked.

"Here, as like as not. I wanted him to stay here, but he wunna. He comes most days."

"Mother," Hilda asked urgently, "is he standing up to it?"

"So far, lass."

"He sort of sheers away from difficulties. Goes round 'em. Escapist, they call it nowadays."

"I didn't ought to tell thee, lass. It's between him and me. But you've a head on your shoulders and you'll 'appen understand. If I hadna' been with him at Big House when the crash came, he wouldna ha'e been here now."

"Go on, Mother."

"A little bottle of poison he'd got in his shaving cupboard."

And she went on to tell of that grey night of suspense, and the morning when she had fought to make David face the music.

"That's just like Dave," sighed Hilda. "He's got no roots. He believes in nothing but himself."

"He needs a wife and childer to care for."

"I shouldn't wonder."

"I thowt at one time as you and him would make a match of it."

Her shrewd eyes were not taken in by Hilda's elaborate unconcern.

"Didn't even ask me," she yawned.

"I thowt that nonsense of waiting till a man asked thee was done wi'."

"If you want to know," said Hilda dully, "I threw myself at his head, and he didn't want me. Not even for a one-night show."

"'Appen now, lass . . ."

"Hopeless, Mother. His pride's hurt. He'll never offer himself to any woman till he can give her the earth. I know my Dave."

"Finished? Tha'll feel better wi' that inside thee. Now go and lay you down on my bed for an hour. You dunna want rings round your eyes when he comes."

A loud bump from overhead.

"That's Moses astir. He'll be shouting for his clean shirt next. Be off wi' you, lass. Out o' my way."

"All ri'," she yawned sleepily. "Treating me like a li'l girl."

She climbed the stairs, and the Sunday morning routine went on. Bacon and egg, and a slice carved off the Sunday joint were sizzling on the hob. The fire was banked right up the chimney, and Moses' striped Sunday shirt, his clean singlet and socks were hung on a clothes-horse and placed round the fire. For like his father, he was 'nesh,' and his

underclothes had to be scorching before he would put them on.

Children, polished and groomed, were on their way to Sunday School, looking for puddles to dim the splendour of their boots. Old miners with caps askew and hands in their pockets were lounging off for their Sunday morning walk, whippets at their heels, across the allotments, down Small's twitchell, and Abram's closes, to finish up at the stroke of twelve before the door of the Bird-in-Hand which opened miraculously at that hour.

Moses had gone on his Sunday morning round and Mother Hubbard was in sole possession of the kitchen when Dave came in.

"Whose is the wreck outside?" he asked, as soon as he was inside the door.

"What wreck?" echoed Mother Hubbard, whose mind was very literal in the morning.

"Two seater," he explained. "Wings bent, held together with string."

"I hadn't taken that much notice," replied his mother. "Expect that's what Hilda came in."

He started. "Hilda? Is she here?"

"Upstairs. Resting. She's come all the way from Newcastle. That'll be a tidy step, I reckon."

Dave thought quickly. She saw the thoughts chasing themselves across his face.

"Tell her I'm sorry I couldn't wait," he began.

"Bide where you are, son," she commanded, going to the foot of the stairs. "Hilda, he's come."

"Blast," muttered Dave. "Now I shall have to go all over it again. It's just like being skinned alive. Damn it, woman, don't you know what it feels like to be watched all the way through Northedge? 'That's 'im,' they say. 'That's Mr. Know-it-all.' And then on top of that, you set Hilda on me."

"Hilda's one o' the family."

"Damn the family!"

"Don't say things like that, Dave. Things you'll

regret. Your own flesh and blood's standing behind you, and that's more than your smart friends can do."

And then Hilda rushed downstairs and flung herself into his arms. Mother Hubbard toddled off into the scullery and clattered noisily about the sink.

"Don't knock me down," protested Dave. "You're a big girl now."

"A very nice brotherly peck," she exclaimed scornfully. "I wasted that entrance."

"You came back from Newcastle last night?"

"M—m."

"In that chariot?"

She nodded.

"Just to see me?"

"What the hell do you think I came for?"

"You're a grand lass, Hilda." He put his arm round her. "Tired?"

"Do I look tired?"

"You look marvellous."

"Thank you, darling. Now, you're going to take me up on the moor and I'm going to rest in the heather and look at the sky while you tell me all."

"All?"

"As much as a young, inexperienced girl ought to know."

"You want to know?"

"Oh, Dave. How can you ask?"

She drove him in the old two-seater high up on the Moor above Asher. They left the car in an abandoned roadside quarry, squeezed through a stone stile, and in a moment were threading their way between islands of purple heather. The ground became boggy, and as they stepped from stone to stone, Dave put out a steadying hand. Her warm hand was caught in his, and they walked on hand in hand, awkwardly, each reluctant to let go.

"This," announced Dave, "is the top of the world."

"Coo!" exclaimed Hilda, as she saw hills rolling in all directions—naked hills, bleak hills, bald hills, hills with collars of fir trees, hills with a stubble of burned bracken. A vast panorama over which cloud shadows raced.

"Isn't there a lot of it," she said, lamely. "And we're so small. We could be lost here."

"People are lost here," answered Dave. "in the snow—"

"That was awful. I was in Sheffield while the search was on. Don't let's talk about it."

"Don't let's talk at all. Just *be*."

"Dave, we've got to talk."

They sat down in the heather. Hilda nursing her knees and frowning at the unaccustomed exercise of marshalling her thoughts. Dave rolled on his back and blinked at the cool blue of the sky.

"Well?" he asked. "Fire away. Do you want all the financial stuff?"

"It just means nowt to me, lad," she replied. "It's you I'm concerned about."

"I'm for the high jump. May keep out of jail, but I'm up before the Official Receiver."

"You're very lonely, Dave."

"Lonely? I like that. I never get a minute to myself. All the world wants ring seats for the knock-out."

"All the same, you're facing this alone. Ma is grand, of course. She always is in a crisis. But she doesn't understand half of what you're going through."

"I prefer to be alone," he muttered.

"Will you remember, Dave, there's me?"

"I'll remember. You'll meet me at the prison door when I come out? That sort of thing?"

"You know I would."

"You're a grand lass."

She sighed.

"I think I'm getting tired of being called a grand lass. Why don't you ask me to marry you?"

He looked up at her impudently.

"If I'd known you were bringing me up here to kidnap me—"

"Dave!" she protested. "Let's *talk*. Not wise-crack."

"All right," he agreed.

"Then, why?"

"Because, my dear, I don't think of you like that."

"Actually, darling, I don't want to be thought of 'like that.' "

"You can't change human nature, old thing."

"I don't want it changed. But I want something more than bed and board. I'm not a Puritan, Dave. And I'm not going to pose as anybody's victim. What I've done I've done with my eyes open."

"I know. A means to an end."

"Um," she agreed. "But there's more to it than that. There always is. I enjoyed it. Don't look shocked, Dave. Girls like a bit of fun as well as men. And some of my sleeping partners were grand fellows."

"Good enough to marry? "

"If they'd asked me (and I'm bound to say they were darn careful not to put ideas in my head), I should have turned 'em down."

"Why? You'd be an ornament to the Peerage."

"Don't know as I want to be an ornament in a family mausoleum. I want a cottage where I can let down my back hair and put my feet up. And that's what you want, Dave."

"Don't you believe it, my girl. I'm not done yet."

This was the first sign she had seen that Dave was going to fight.

"You think you want a big house, a blonde secretary (secretary my foot), and, later on, a wife who's county. But you don't. They're standards to impress other people. Like a foreman's bowler hat. Or a knighthood. Really big people have been known to refuse knighthoods. But then, they were sure of themselves. Don't interrupt, Dave. I'm not good at words, but this is suddenly coming clear. You're *not* sure of yourself. No, deep down inside, you're not. Not as sure as Abby."

"Abby!" he scoffed.

"Yes, Abby," she insisted. "He's known all along what he meant to do with his life, and he's gone and done it. Quietly. No fireworks. No audience. When you were a kid, I remember, you always had to have an audi-

ence. You did clever things so you'd be admired. Abby never asks for admiration. He knows whether his work is good or bad."

"You do rub it in, don't you, darling?"

"I'm not being put off, Dave. This thing has been staring me in the face all my life and I've never really seen it till this moment. It's like playing to the gallery. Oh, I know I've played to the gallery. We all do. But we know when we're playing for applause and when we're putting something real across. The audience knows it, too."

"Well," he demanded, "how does all this affect me?"

"I'm working round to that."

"Don't work round. Tell me straight. Get the poison out of your system, darling."

"Sorry, Dave, if it hurts."

"Hurts? It's the funniest turn I've seen in years. Satan rebuking Sin."

She gently stroked his arm. He started at her light touch. They were very much aware of each other.

"That's how I can understand you, Dave. We had to get out of the Rows, and we took short cuts. You went in for this confidence trick stuff. I hopped into bed with anyone who could teach me my job. Short cuts. And they led us through the mud. We're both bedraggled, Dave."

"Well, what can we do about it?"

"We've got to go back and begin all over again."

"You're all right. *You've* come through. But what am I to do?"

"Get a job somewhere. Something real. Not playing about with shares."

"You're as bad as the old lass. She's got a wild cat notion of buying up Hodder's bankrupt business. Say anything to you about it?"

"No," she lied.

"Well, she will. She'll use you to coax me to take it on. Silly idea, starting again here of all places."

"Takes courage," she considered judicially.

"Meaning I haven't any? For two pins I'd show you."

"Sounds like a good third act. Back to the home town. Local lad makes good. Rounds the story off nicely. Because you *would* make good, of course. Remember those bright ideas you used to offer old Hodder?"

He chuckled.

"Quite sound, too. If he'd put 'em in practice, he'd be sitting pretty now."

"And they could be applied elsewhere. Syndicalise them. Get a group of papers."

"There's quite a bit of that going on. The women's tripe, gardening stuff, and so on, all come in stereo ready for the machines."

"Stereo?" she asked.

"Blocked out in a sort of cardboard," he explained. "Pour lead into this, and you've got your column ready to print. The idea could be extended. If I only had capital. A chain of local papers from John o' Groats to Land's End. Think of the advertising pull—"

"Why didn't you do this, Dave, instead of mucking about with finance? This would have been a real job which wanted doing. When the slump ended, you'd have been ready to tackle the Berrys, Beaverbrook, or Rothermere."

"Hey! Come down to earth," he mocked. "What about some food?"

They ate the snap Mother Hubbard had put up for them, and drank out of the same thermos cap. From far below came the murmur of traffic—a never-ending stream of beetle-like saloons chasing each other over long ribbons of macadam. Occasional hikers, brave young things with burnished limbs, stood out on the skyline and then were gone. The stillness and the peace drugged them into silence. Yet the seed she had sown in his mind was germinating.

"It could still be done," he blurted out suddenly.

She sat very still and gave no sign.

"It's bound to be done," he added, "sometime by someone."

She smiled at him indulgently. He flushed.

"No reason why it shouldn't be done by me."

"It'd be a Hell of a struggle," she reminded him.

He looked at her keenly.

"You think I'm soft, don't you, my girl? Let me tell you I love a Hell of a struggle.

"Besides, there's mother's money to consider. She's putting it up. She ought to keep it for her old age but you know what she is. I can't let her lose it. She'd be so proud of helping.

"But I couldn't bear a blind alley job tying me to Northedge all my life. I must see something ahead, something to go for—Beaverbrook, Berry—I wonder.

"But where do you come in?"

"We'd do this together, Dave."

"You're not going to run me. And I don't want any of your damned charity. I'll do this by myself or not at all. Sorry, Hilda. I didn't mean that. But you do see I've got to work out my own salvation. I can't sponge on you."

He was talking up to the sky. It was easier that way. He didn't see the sun glinting on her forearm and turning the fine down to gold. He couldn't be disturbed by the rising and falling of her small rounded breasts beneath her blouse. He ached to throw his head in her lap and find peace.

"I'd love to be a jobbing printer's wife," she sighed.

"Then you'll be disappointed. I would never offer—"

"I don't want any offers," she interrupted. "I want a man—not a position. And I'd go with him to the end. Damn it, Dave, you're not buying me. I'm not for sale."

He pulled himself up, and looked straight into her eyes.

"I don't want any more directions from you. I shall make love in my own way, and my way is to pour the riches of the Indies in your lap. Until then—"

He scrambled to his feet, and dragged her up after him.

"Time we were going home. We've got business to do."

"Yes, Dave," she said meekly. "But you did say *my* lap, didn't you?"

He pulled her to him and tilted back her head. Her lips met his in surrender.

CHAPTER XXVII

STRIPPED of his possessions, Dave went back to Hodder's Printing Works as manager. With Uncle Alfred doing odd chores and taking cash for advertisements at the counter, and one linotype operator tapping away at an ancient machine, Dave found he had to be editor, sole reporter and occasional "comp." He threw himself into the job.

All the ideas Mr. Hodder had scotched when he was sub-reporter were tried out. He forgot none of the money-spinning dodges, but he had to work for advertisements. Bindle's announcements were withdrawn as soon as Dave's connection with the paper became known. Dave retaliated by suppressing the Alderman's speeches. "Alderman Bindle also spoke," the Advertiser recorded. When the Alderman addressed a strong protest to the editor, it was splashed on the front page, and Alderman Bindle's next oration was printed as given—with every missing aspirate, every "er" and "um" and every repetition. A cartoon by Abby showing Bindle in full spate, but in place of his impeccable morning coat, wearing some of his choice lingerie, illustrated the text. The sales of this issue leaped up. Bindle knew when he was beaten. After a suitable interval, he buried the hatchet, and the bargains in his White Sale were duly recorded in the advertising columns of the paper.

Dave found the opportunity to give Moses a leg up, and at the same time to give a fillip to the Musical and Professional Announcements. "Moses Hubbard, Bass Vocalist" in all the pride of his starched shirt looked solemnly out of the advertising columns. After that all the L.R.A.M.'s of the village hastened to get blocks made of their more successful portraits, and these joined Moses's among the "smalls."

Abby's cartoons were a feature. He shouldn't have contributed them, of course, as he was under contract to another paper, but Hubbards had always stuck together in a crisis, contracts or no contracts, and no Masonic dinner,

Rotary lunch, or Sports Meetings was reported without a sketch recording the features of all the principals. The victims, their relatives, friends and enemies, all hastened to buy copies, and the original line drawings displayed for a week in the office windows, fetched fancy prices.

Dave roped in a clever young schoolmaster to cover all the musical events in the district. This lad had definite opinions on Handel, and judged the local talent by a high standard. After he had laid lustily about him, Dave had enough forthright correspondence to fill his issue. Uncle Alfred was alarmed at the "to-do," but Dave loved it.

"Makes 'em read the rag," he gloated.

But he never neglected to publish photographs of the principals, and long lists of members of the chorus, because there wasn't a soul who wouldn't buy a copy to see himself in print.

He gave up-to-date news of the hospital and of the progress of its patients—a real service in a colliery village. He told his readers what books to get out of the County Library, what bargains could be got from Northedge traders (especially those who advertised with him), he told the ramblers where to ramble, he gave free advertisements to football and cricket clubs who wished to arrange fixtures, and he got free reports of their matches in return.

Then he turned his attention to the solid serious elders, and reported one sermon each week. This brought advertisements of special events (at a reduced rate) of School Sermons, Harvest Thanksgivings, and visiting pulpit celebrities.

He encouraged his readers to let him mail a weekly copy to their relations away from home or overseas, for Northedge men had built up sturdy families wherever the English tongue was spoken.

It was hard work, but it was worth the effort. The newspaper became a necessity to the community. It began to show a small profit.

Hilda was away on tour, but she was anxious to do her bit. When she came home she told Dave all about her fellow artistes, thumb-nail sketches, with sly impressions of

their tricks and mannerisms. Dave jotted these down and soon had the basis of a series of "Footlight Favourites" articles. Abby contributed some caricatures.

"When are you going to print 'em?" demanded Hilda.

"Too bright to waste on Northedge," decided Dave.

"They're good enough for Fleet Street."

"Fleet Street be blowed," she retorted. "It's *your* paper I want to go."

"Wait," said Dave.

A smart young reporter was added to the staff. After he had been coached out of his notion of writing literature and improving the taste of the working classes, he became an enthusiastic news hound. Dave was now free to leave Northedge for a few hours at a time. He had been collecting local papers since he started, and now he felt the time was ripe to syndicalise his "features."

In Hilda's "Footlight Favourites" he had a strong card. Abby's weekly cartoon (under an assumed name) was a certain winner. John's Trade Union Notes might not go down so well, for weekly papers were so often owned by old Tory families. But Enoch's Sports Gossip was a sure fire winner. Everybody was in. Even Moses was dragged in to pontificate on singing, while Mother Hubbard's Cookery Hints became a household word north of the Trent.

Prices were low. Dave found he couldn't charge more than four-and-six an article, against the competition of the established syndicates. He had one advantage over them. His stuff was fresh, and it fitted the requirements of a small community like a glove. Editors who bought were not disappointed. The foundations of a solid business were patiently and securely laid.

Mother Hubbard never became accustomed to her role of newspaper proprietor. She signed all papers put before her by Dave with a blind trust.

"Want me to sign my death warrant agen? Wouldn't it do if tha' signed for me? Nay? Such rubbidge. All reight, wheer's my glasses? Might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb."

It was the old lady's Indian Summer. For a few brief months the family worked together, and the centre of it all was the kitchen of No. 42, Long Row. It was almost too good to be true. She crouched by the fireside in the shadows because the light troubled her eyes, and listened to the give and take of the family councils while she dreamed of the days when her lads tumbled and wrestled about her feet and she was peace-maker in their quarrels. Sometimes the dream seemed more real than the present, and then her lips would silently frame the words she had spoken long ago. When she spoke to her sons, she gave their names a caressing quality out of the past. They were feckless mites who required patience, bless their hearts. She was peace-maker again now, and pulled them up when they were going too far.

The enthusiasm slowly burned itself out. John's wife wanted to make the paper a Labour Party organ, and said Dave was all things to all men. Enoch's wife disapproved of Hilda, and wouldn't come near her, but couldn't keep her finger out of the pie. Moses packed up first. He was offered a job in the publishing room to issue the papers to the boys and keep some semblance of order among them. Nay, he was a collier, and wanted none of them fancy jobs. And they needn't put his name in the paper any more because the Exchange was asking questions about how much he got out of it. He went back to his dole.

John and Enoch packed up next, but not before Dave had trained suitable substitutes. The Syndicate was bringing in a steady trickle of fees now. Abby still sent an occasional cartoon or a 'comic,' but he was in London, drawing a daily film strip—and 'strip' said John's wife, who was strait-laced, was the right word. He never came home, but Mother Hubbard reckoned they'd see him when he'd singed his wings.

Dave wouldn't marry Hilda until he was out of debt, and he was furious when she offered to put the money down. Hilda stormed, too, and went off to play the Northern Circuit while the quarrel still raged. The intervals between her visits lengthened, and when she came she was

pale beneath her make-up, and there were lines of strain under her eyes. Dave, too, was strained and irritable, jumping down people's throats. A queer courtship, thought Mother Hubbard. It wasn't natural to wait. What was there to wait for?

Then Dave got a job with a group of provincial papers—a hotch-potch of papers of all kinds, all self-contained, and all running similar features independently. His task was to cut out duplication, and to run all the features, but those with local application, from one centre. It was a job after his own heart. Not only was he to cut down costs, but also to beat up circulation. He found he could do neither of these while the editors of the various papers sat tight and invented reasons for refusing his features, and running on the old tried and trusted methods. He argued, but was met with polite resistance. They had no time for this vehement young man.

Dave knew he had to fight or give in. He selected his opponent, an editor of the old school who carried his umbrella to the office wet or fine, and wrote a scholarly editorial exactly a column in length on news two days old. And he fought as he had learned to fight in the Rows, head down, arms threshing like flails, hitting above or below the belt. They were saying behind his back, "Not out of the top drawer exactly." Well, let them watch out. He fought him until one of them must get out. It was not Dave who went. The others noted the change in the wind, and trimmed their sails accordingly. Dave's plans were carried out and he was made managing editor of the whole group at a four-figure salary. Half of this went to the Official Receiver. His debt was reduced by £2,000 now, but the total was still formidable.

Mother Hubbard wanted him to sell the Northedge business.

"Nay," he said, squeezing her shoulders. "That's your nest egg. I'll make you a rich woman before I die."

"I dunna want to be a rich woman," she grumbled. "I'd rather see thee out of debt."

"So that's the idea," he grinned.

"It's your money," she persisted. "You made it."

"Yours," he insisted. "I should think you're worth about £5,000 now. One of these days, a nice old widower will come along and hang his hat up."

"Get along wi' you."

"You ought to make a will. Seriously."

"I'll make no will. You must please yoursens. So long as you don't turn Moses adrift."

And there the matter dropped.

Then one morning Mother Hubbard received a thin, crinkly letter with a strange stamp. It was from Abby, telling how he had gone to Spain to join the International Brigade.

"He's no feighter," growled Moses, who now saw the shambles of France through a golden haze of memory.

"He'll soon have his bellyful."

Dave shrugged his shoulders.

"Silly young fool," he decided.

John's mouth set hard when he read the letter.

"The kid's right," he said. "It sticks out a mile. And all we can do is this non-intervention fraud. I feel as sick as a dog about it."

"That's enough, John," said his wife. "You'll be wanting to go next, and your place is here. You've got to take the long view. If the Empire's dropping to pieces, it isn't your business."

"All the same," insisted John, "I'm proud of the kid."

And Mother Hubbard was too tired to worry. Abby would go his own way. Nothing could be done about it. She could only pray for his safe return.

"Dost'a think there'll be another war?" Moses asked John.

"About Spain? Nay. This government won't fight."

"I mean the Germans."

"Or Russia?"

"It's all one to me, lad."

"You want to fight again, Mo'?"

"Nay. I reckon I've done my bit. But if there's a war, I shall get my job back. They'll want hewers."

"What wickedness!" declared Mother Hubbard. "That I should live to hear a son of mine say he wants a war."

"Aye," agreed Moses imperturbably, "And t' sooner t' better. And there's a lot more thinks like me."

It was many months before news came that Abby had been wounded and had lost an arm. Mother Hubbard mourned the loss of his limb but was glad it was no worse. With luck, he could now make his way home.

When he came, he was a stranger. His deep-set eyes looked through her at horrors he would see as long as he lived. His lean face was burned the colour of mahogany, but it was drawn and taut. His right sleeve was empty and she thought of his drawings. She stroked the empty sleeve and he winced. Neither of them spoke of his loss.

He walked alone every day on the moors but some fever possessed him. After a fortnight, he went back to London. They didn't speak his language in Northedge. They didn't care about Spain. They knew freedom was being crucified, but it wasn't their business.

By 1939 the Pit was silent. Its stays and gear hung like a gallows over the north end of the village. The company houses were half empty, with broken panes and boarded-up windows, and the Rows were scheduled for demolition. Only a few colliers lived in Northedge now and they travelled long distances to their work.

Mother Hubbard knew little of all this, for she rarely set foot outside the door these days. Neighbours' children ran her errands, and Moses, who had nothing to do except collect his dole, did an occasional bout of shopping. He was the only one at home now.

She was old. Worn out, she used to say. She hobbled about between the fireplace and the sink, and did what she could, but work was a burden. Her bright red bricks were now dull and greasy; her stove no longer shone like a mirror. An old newspaper was spread for a tablecloth and black rings showed where saucepans and frying pans had rested. If you helped yourself from these, you saved washing-up.

Mother Hubbard, herself, was untidy. Wisps of dirty grey hair fell over her forehead as she worked. The flesh had fallen away from her bones and, as she sat in the chimney corner, she looked like a witch.

Her daughters-in-law shook their heads over her.

"She can't do for herself," they decided.

Her sons said: "She's welcome to make her home with us," and their wives dutifully agreed so long as everybody took their fair share. But Mother Hubbard just looked at these proposals with her witch's eyes, and nothing more was done.

And then that dull ache started in her left breast. She had never complained about trifles like pains before and she didn't see why she should now. But she got Moses to bring her a bottle of port home from the club, and she had a glass at night. It gave her a nice drugged feeling, and helped her to forget the ache long enough to fall asleep. And life went on again, much as usual.

Then Mother Hubbard felt a lump within her breast. She felt her other breast to see if a lump ought to be there, but she knew all along it was something new and terrifying. For years she had dreaded 'a growth,' for nobody ever called it by its real name. And what with the ache and this new worry she tossed sleeplessly all night. In the morning she made Moses go to Mother Adler and ask her to call.

Mother Adler didn't bring her little black bag. She had been deposed as midwife, but she was still consulted by her old patients who took small stock of young doctors and district nurses. Besides you didn't mind showing your body to an old woman like Mother Adler.

She gingerly prodded the swelling.

"Aye, it's a growth right enough," she confirmed.

"You'll ha'e to ha'e t'doctor."

"Couldn't *you* do something, Mrs. Adler?" quavered the old lady, desperately, "with herbs and things?"

"Nay. It's a doctor's job, yon, and sooner the better. I'll leave a message as I'm homing it."

And Mother Hubbard boiled a small pan of hot water,

washed herself and put on a clean chemise for the doctor's benefit.

"Why didn't you send for me before?" he said, in his kindly, tired voice. "How old are you?"

"I s'all nivver see seventy again."

"That's no age. You've many a year before you. Now, let me see—"

"Will thee ha'e t'cut me, doctor?"

"You won't feel anything. I'll send the ambulance for you at two o'clock to-morrow."

"You're not ta'eing me to th' horspital. I wain't go."

"You will. You want to get better, don't you? You've got sons and grandsons who want you to live on, haven't you?"

You couldn't explain things to a doctor. He was down your throat in a minute, and then out of the door, and halfway down the street.

Mother Hubbard put on her best next day, and packed her nightdress, comb, her knitting, and her glasses in her wicker hold-all. She didn't use the new leather case Dave had bought her because the hospital people might want to be paid if they saw that bag, and she didn't want Dave put to any expense. She left Moses with the strictest instructions to write to Hilda and all her sons. Quite a little crowd of neighbours saw her off and waved as the car went round the corner. She waved bravely in return.

She was operated on next day, and, like all operations, it was successful. For a long time she lay in a stupor, recovering from the effects of ether, waking and falling asleep again, dreaming, her ears filled with wild, sweet music. She awoke the next day, weak, but clear headed. It took her some time to grasp her surroundings. The long, bare room with the iron bedsteads, the clipclap of the nurse's heels on the polished floor, and the inevitable cold draught that blew like a typhoon.

Her ache. Yes, it had gone. She tried to move her hand to her left breast but she was too weak for the effort. She looked down at the bedclothes to see if she bulged where she ought to bulge. But she couldn't tell whether

her breast had gone. It was bandaged. They must have cut her. Well, it didn't matter what they did to an old woman. She'd had her day. She dozed off again.

The next morning, she was slightly better. She was able to drink a cup of tea and crumble a bit of bread and butter. Luke-warm tea and weak as water. And the butter had turned a bit. She wasn't equal to conversation yet, but she sent a wan smile across the wards to the beds opposite.

Then it was visiting day, and the patients began to preen themselves just after breakfast although nobody would come till the afternoon. Nurse thought she might have just two visitors—no more. Her eyes were dim with staring at the door when Dave and Moses walked in. Moses looked scared, poor lad, but how proud she felt as Dave stepped lightly and confidently down the room.

They had to bend their heads to catch the words from her lips.

"Gi'e me my fause teeth, Dave. They're in a cup in t'cupboard. Canna talk wi'out 'em."

"Nurse says you're not to talk at all, Ma."

"She does, does she?"

"She does. And she can turn us out, remember. So you leave the talking to me, and you just nod. Got that?"

She nodded obediently.

"Getting on all right?"

She nodded, and then whispered hoarsely. "They've cut me."

Dave stroked her hair back.

"It's a shame, old lady. But we don't mind if you get better."

"Want to go home," she whispered, struggling with her tears. Dave patted her head and his eye roved over the charts at the head of the bed while he gave her time to recover.

"Carcinoma of the left breast. Amputation—" he read and shivered slightly.

"Liss'n to me, Mother," he said, stooping until his lips were close to her ear. "You've had a dangerous opera-

tion. You've got to stay quiet and give your body a chance to heal. It would be dangerous to move you now."

Her eyes searched his.

"I *shall* get better?"

"If you stay quiet. Will you?"

She nodded.

"That's a good girl."

Then the nurse came fussing round, and they smiled encouragingly and left. Enoch and John, refused permission to come further, stood and waved in the doorway. Mother Hubbard felt a thrill of exaltation. No other woman in the ward could have produced four such upstanding sons.

But in a second, they had gone, and she faced grey empty days until they could come again. What had Dave said she must do? Stay quiet. Dunna fret. Stay quiet. Dunna fret. How could she keep from fretting in a hospital ward? She'd had her own way too long to knuckle under to a nurse or a sister or whatever she called herself. She'd had a place of her own where she could hide when she was hurt. But here she was never alone—always being watched. If her stomach rumbled (and no wonder with hospital vittles) everybody heard it and she was shamed. If tears welled in her eyes, twelve pairs of eyes noted them. She heard and saw such things, too. She'd heard a young woman break down and scream in the night, and she'd seen the screen placed round the bed in the corner and solemn visitors tip-toeing across the bare floor at unusual hours. She knew, they all knew, what that meant.

Abby came one day. Just strolled in one morning after the doctor made his rounds, and had sat by her side some time before the scandalised sister shooed him out. Just like Abby. He went his own way. She stroked his empty sleeve wistfully.

"We've both been under the knife," she whispered. "Did it hurt?"

"It hurt most to feel I'd never be able to draw again. But I can. It's something inside you which draws. You can train your right or your left hand to do it. I believe

you could draw with your teeth if you were up against it."

"It worries me," she sighed.

"It needn't," he grinned. "I've got used to it. And it comes in useful when you want to break into hospitals out of hours. Everybody thought I was a patient."

And then sister came up like a clucking hen and Abby was hustled out of the ward. She lived for moments like these.

Then her pain came back, and the doctor gave her something to make her sleep. The days went by in a haze of memories. She resented being roused for meals. And then in a lucid interval, she resented the drug that caused oblivion. They were putting her away quietly. She insisted that the dull nagging pain was gone. To lie in a stupor through visiting day didn't suit her book at all. For she wanted to see Dave.

He came at last, touched her forehead lightly with his lips, and glanced at her chart. But her face told him all he must know. The skin was drawn more tightly over the bones, and her mouth had fallen in.

"Dave," she whispered urgently. It was only a thin hiss of air escaping from her lips. He had to bend over her to catch the words.

"Dave! I want to go home."

And her eyes, still fiercely alive, watched his face for the answer. Was he going to say "Stay quiet. Don't fret?" Didn't he realise she couldn't get better here? He smiled back at her with his lips, but his eyes were troubled.

"Dave," she whispered. "They're drugging me."

Ah, that made him sit up.

CHAPTER XXVIII

"TELL me the truth, Doctor."

"Well, of course, at her age it's a serious operation—"

Dave shrugged impatiently. The House Surgeon looked him straight in the eyes, asking him mutely whether he could face it. Dave nodded.

"Hopeless," sighed the doctor.

Dave knew it, but braced himself to fight the truth.

"You don't know her. She'll fight. I can make her fight."

"Then don't," replied the doctor. "If she manages to hang on to life, remember what sort of life it will be. Never free from that gnawing pain. No sleep except the sleep of the drugged. You've heard death called 'a blessed release'? Well, it happens to be true."

Dave suddenly felt sick, but pulled himself together.

"Then it doesn't matter if—?"

"Take her home if she'll be happier there. Give her what happiness she can get. God knows, mothers deserve it. If men had to go through half as much as their women suffer, such an outcry would rise to Heaven. . . . Here, sit down . . . Bend your head . . . Lower . . . Lower still . . . Right between your knees . . . Feeling better now?"

"I'm all right," stammered Dave. "Bit of a shock, I expect. I don't turn over like that as a rule. Afraid I've been a bit of a nuisance."

"That's all right, lad. I'll have her ready by two o'clock. I'll fix her that she won't feel the journey. Better get something to eat."

So Mother Hubbard went back to the Rows where she had lived and where, God willing, she would die. Back to the big bed where she had lain with her man, and in which she had brought forth five sons. Her small figure scarcely lifted up the white counterpane.

Mrs. Baird slopped in and out, "doing" for Moses and clumping upstairs with great messes of food. John's wife bustled in and out competently. She'd have made a good nurse, that one. Bossy. Treated an old woman of seventy-two as if she was a baby. But she was clean, that was something.

Dave wanted a nurse in the house, but Mother Hubbard would have none of it. The District Nurse called night and morning, changed her dressings, and made her bed and washed her. The doctor called daily, and that was quite

enough upset without having a nurse interfering at every verse end.

She dreamed the days away, and the drugs the doctor gave her to numb the pain helped her to dream. And she didn't fret and worry, because she must husband her strength. The boys took turns in sitting up with her. It was queer sitting there in the darkness, listening to the fitful breathing of the frail old woman. Sometimes the breath seemed to die away altogether and they would strain their ears to detect its faint whisper. Then it would grow harsh and rusty, punctuated with little moans.

Abby did more than his share of the watching. Death no longer frightened him. He saw angles and planes, high lights and shadows in that small room. He studied his mother's face dispassionately, a peasant's face in its bony structure (he had never noticed that before), framing dark caverns out of which peered frightened eyes. Yes, that, too, he had never noticed before. Her eyes were, and always had been, frightened. What effort of will had been summoned to drive that timid peasant girl to do what she had done? She had conquered fear in life, and she would conquer fear of the dark.

He watched the others as they came in and out of the sick room, full of virtue at doing the right thing, and escaping with alacrity as soon as they had made their cheering noises. All afraid. Faces. Faces he had taken for granted. Faces he had built up out of memory. Now he saw them as they really were, rough hewn, carved by time and experience. Moses was grizzled, with the bleached look of the miner, the spitten image of old Eli but lacking the playboy twinkle in his eye. John was like his mother in her prime, handsome in a severe way, but the peasant rock was pushing up through the crust.

The wives, too. No doubt Enoch and John saw seduction in the curve of their limbs, but he, Abby, the artist, saw them as they were, ordinary plain, sagging females, bolstered up by the arts of the corsetiere and the dress-maker. What loyalties to their dreams men had! What memories of passionate tenderness to survive the hard

facts of sullen mouths, brittle voices, and sweaty armpits.

By comparison, his mother was beautiful. Old women were beautiful, not with the heedless grace of youth, but with the beauty of experience. Every wrinkle in place. Each line a story. In a sense, we carve our own features.

To the doctor's surprise, Mother Hubbard slowly improved. She could sit up in bed, and talk for a few minutes without tiring.

One day she beckoned Abby to the bedside.

"I want to see Mester Bindle," she announced in her small voice.

"Thinking of new undies?"

"Don't be saucy, lad. What dost'a know about such things?"

"Well?" he asked.

"It's business, and it's secret. Dave's not to know. Can you bring him?"

"When?"

"This afternoon when the room's been tidied up."

The late afternoon saw Alderman Bindle by the bedside.

"Getting better, eh? Soon be up and about again? You're a wonderful woman."

She dismissed all this sick-room optimism with a shake of the head.

"Liss'n," she said. "I've got a business to sell. A good business."

Alderman Bindle stiffened to attention.

"For them as likes that class of thing. What makes you want to sell such a good business?"

"Nivver thee mind. It would suit thee. Bring in good income, and advertising your bits of nonsense'll cost nowt."

"I'm non sure I owt to speculate at my time of life—at the latter end, as you might say. I owt rather to be thinkin' o' salvation."

"Not wi' your chances," she retorted acidly. He grinned back at her.

"I'll think it o'er. Mind you, I'm not saying I will, and I'm not saying I won't. If the price is all right—"

"Five thousand," she said calmly.

"Wheer's my hat? Five thousand? You're dreaming. Now you take it easy, Mrs. Hubbard. Don't you bother your head wi' business until you're better. Then you'll see things in a proper light. And don't forget it was me started your Dave in business."

"Started him downhill," she said quietly. "I want to pay his debts so he can go the other way."

"Debts? He's been discharged from bankruptcy, ain't he?"

"Fifteen shillings in t'pound. He's going to pay twenty shillings, and I want it done afore I go."

"Four thousand," he bid. "Though I should have to see the books."

"I mun ha'e five," she said wearily.

"Four. That's my last word. Take it or leave it."

"I canna bargain. Five will clear his name, and five I mun have."

Her head sank back on the pillow.

"Does Dave know you're selling?" he asked suddenly.

"No," she whispered. "He . . . wouldn't sell . . . to thee."

He paused on his way to the door.

"Give me first refusal at five thousand," he cried hoarsely.

She had just strength enough left to nod.

When he had gone she was terribly tired, and the doctor had to be fetched in a hurry. For two days she lay husbanding her strength, and then she spoke again to Abbv. Alderman Bindle was to have all the information he asked for from the man who did the books. Then when she had his firm offer, Dave must be sent for.

I'm like a big spider, she thought, weaving my web and biding my time until I get what I want. Dave came on one of his mother's bad days. The figure in the bed stirred uneasily. Dave dipped his head to her lips and tried to piece the wisps of breath into coherent speech.

"Has . . . Abby . . .?"

"Yes. He's told me."

"It's . . . ?"

"It's all right. Don't you worry."

He was glad to wind the business up. It would only chain him to Northedge. The ties which bound him to the place had snapped—all but one tenuous thread, and that would snap at any moment. He didn't care, now. The doctor was right. She had suffered enough. There was no sense in going on when the battle was lost.

"When the money comes . . . you'll pay . . . your debts?"

"Every penny."

"And then . . ."

"Now, what have you got in your head?"

"Hilda . . . You'll wed Hilda . . . while I'm . . . here?"

Dave squeezed her hand.

"If she's ready," he promised.

She smiled, a tired, wistful smile.

"Hurry, son. Hurry," she whispered.

Then she dozed, day-dreamed, and dozed again, losing count of the days, but serenely confident she would be spared for the wedding day.

She didn't fret because she couldn't go to the Chapel. When her bed had been pushed to the window, she was able to look over the neglected gardens towards the main road, and watch the cars, decorated with white ribbon. She couldn't see very well, but she fancied the bride waved to her and was content.

There was a great racket when the party returned. Hilda and Dave came straight upstairs and the old lady joined their hands together and smiled at them.

Then all the relations had to mount the stairs to pay their respects. Uncle Alfred, already primed with ale, and moustaches waxed in the dashing manner of Edwardian blades; Moses who had shed his coat at the first opportunity, hair oiled and brushed into a quiff fringe; Enoch, round and prosperous, ready to preside professionally over "the doings" downstairs; John, very square and solid; and Abby wistful, and ready to run away.

She still looked towards the door.

"She wants to see the grandchildren," Abby interpreted.

Enoch creaked downstairs to summon his children, and shepherded them up. They came in timorously, wrinkling their noses like puppies at the sick room smell. Plump, pleasant children, they stood nervously at the side of the bed. The old lady laid her shrivelled hand on the boy's hot, plump little fist. A man's hand in the making. And this was her grand-daughter's? What did they call her? Slender, capable, long-fingered.

They tip-toed out of the room, and the old lady's eyes followed them to the door.

Her lips moved again.

"She wants your brats, John," announced Abby.

"I don't hold with it," exclaimed John's wife. "They know Granny's poorly, that's all. But they're not to come upstairs. You never know . . ."

"All right, Ma," said John. "I'll bring them."

And Mother Hubbard peered at their round faces with her dim eyes, stroked their hands, and let them go. Five sons she had, and four grandchilder, and, please God, more to come.

Then Enoch opened a bottle with a loud pop, and she drank the health of the bride. Queer, fizzy stuff, that went up her nose and made her splutter. And Hilda insisted on bringing the cake upstairs, so that she could see it cut, and she tucked a piece under her pillow as girls used to do, for luck.

They had gone now, and she could rest after all the excitement. Down below they were busy with knives and forks. Voices were rising as the glasses were emptied and replenished. Then there was a hammering at the table. Speeches. Toasts. Gusts of laughter. Shrill giggles. A pushing back of chairs. Then the warning honk of a car. They'd be going away now.

When they looked in to say goodbye, she was too tired to talk. Hilda kissed her impulsively and Dave bit his lip to keep back his tears. They would never see her again.

Please God to take her while she was happy. The car honked again, and they were gone.

Abby was sitting in the corner watching her now. So Hilda and Dave had gone? Of course. They'd kissed her, and she'd said . . . What had she said? Things slid out of her head so easily, and she was so tired.

The sound of music came dimly to her ears. Moses was singing "The Trumpeter." It was nice to hear them enjoying themselves. She ought to be down there looking after things. Only she was so weary.

Hers had been a long life and a full life. She had been tired often enough, and many a time had gone hungry that her young might be fed. She had chosen her bed and she had lain on it. Often she had chafed against her lot, and once she had run away, but nothing came of that.

She had coveted a house away from the squalor of the Rows, and that prayer had been answered, but too late. She had fought to keep her sons out of the maws of the Pit, and thank God, all but one were addling their money above ground. But not, as men should, in the sun, tossing haycocks on the wagon, while patches of sweat stained the backs of their shirts. No, not that way.

The sour smell of the Pit had been with her all her married life. Sweat-soaked singlets, blackamoors gulping their snap and falling asleep over their victuals. Strikes, meetings, pickets, processions. Torch-light making crazy patterns as the men marched to fight and destroy. Tightened belts. Scavenging on the Pit-tip. The queue at the Labour. That had been her life.

Women. Women like vampires—loose collier women—waiting to prey on her sons. The buttoned-up women they wed. She wouldn't stand between them and her sons any longer. They'd ha'e to fend for themselves, poor lads.

She had done what she could, and now the end was at hand, and it was the same for all, rich and poor, high and low. Panting for breath on the old bed where you'd tossed in your hot blood, and borne your sons in fear and sweat.

A whistle of breath, no longer than a sigh, escaped her lips.

Abby bent his head to catch her words.

"Too late," he sighed. "Too late."

She was laid to rest in the hillside cemetery, facing the stays and gear of the deserted pit. The mine was derelict and the countryside from which she came was abandoned to weed and bracken, but she had transmitted to her sons the courage of the collier and the tenacity of the peasant, and her life was woven into the tapestry of her land.



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